

*Screen Cultures: German Film and the Visual*

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## After the Avant-Garde

### Contemporary German and Austrian Experimental Film

Edited by  
Randall Halle  
and  
Reinhild Steingröver

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## 4: Videorebels: Actions and Interventions of the German Video-Avant-Garde

Annette Jael Lehmann

IN THE EARLY 1950s FRENCH FILMMAKER AND THEORIST Guy Debord developed one of the most original critiques of film as a mass medium. At the age of just under twenty he attached himself to the Lettrist movement around Isidore Isou, which attracted his attention because of the scandal its adherents caused at the 1951 Cannes Film Festival. His first contribution to Lettrist filmmaking premiered in Paris in 1952, but it was stopped after twenty minutes because of protests from the public. This was because *Hurllements en faveur de Sade* (Howlings in favor of Sade) did not contain a single image but simply alternated between a brightly-lit, white, and completely dark cinema screen. Spoken dialogue could be heard in the light sequences; the dark passages were completely without sound. It was not until 13 October 1952 that a troop of Lettrists successfully insisted on a complete performance of the one-and-a-half-hour film. This time the audiences were prevented from leaving the cinema through a combination of promises and violence, and so finally came to enjoy the end with its twenty-four minutes of darkness and silence. Debord's film fundamentally rejects any form of spectacle. He had already defined the foundation of situationism in his first effective public appearance, proclaiming programatically in the screenplay that the arts of the future will be violent upheavals in situations. This radical critique of the media society then became the cornerstone for his theory of the society of the spectacle, which was to greatly influence the 1968 student movement. His aim of harming the spectacle society, which he was still proclaiming in 1992, is already clearly present in his cinematic work forty years earlier.

The expansion of television (and film) in mass culture that began in the mid-1960s prompted the first generation of video artists to adopt a critical attitude toward the mass media, inspired by the analyses of Guy Debord, Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman, and, later, Jean Baudrillard. Encouraged as well by the various political movements of the 1960s, video art shared a basic notion of cultural criticism, generally questioning the traditional conduct of social life, especially traditional power relationships as well as an aesthetic of consumption. Video art practices in the early days tried to provide a utopian glimpse of a "liberated" mass medium and

allowed for an alternative attempt to use mass media in a technological, consumerist society. The use of technology, especially broadcast television, specifically implied an act of profound social criticism. TV had become the central paradigm of mainstream industrial and technological culture and was often harshly criticized as part of an ideology-based cultural industry. In opposition video became the alternative site of art production in society with one central notion: it was to merge art with social life, redefining the relationship between audience and artist, consumer and producer. Video aimed at transforming every aspect of life — which was its central utopian project — and thus positioned itself in the tradition of a revolutionary avant-garde project.

Overall, two tendencies, often linked, can be seen in early video art: the intent to criticize the media and the focus on exploring mass media's visual and representational structures. Six Artists' collectives such as *Bum Top Value Television (TVTV)* and *Ant Farm*, which were vigorously opposed to television as a mass medium, used the medium of video to produce alternative TV news, or experimented with new interview techniques. Television sets and television itself were used as a component of Fluxus performances, and artists such as Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell created the first installations using TV sets. Paik, who is generally regarded as the father of video art today, has been exploring the medium of television since the early 1960s, collaborating with John Cage in Düsseldorf, for instance, as well as opening his first major exhibition, *Exposition of Music-Electronic Television*, in 1963 in Wuppertal. Since he belonged to the pioneer generation of media artists, his television actions were especially well received by the German audience.

"This is a glimpse of the video landscape of tomorrow, when you will be able to switch to any TV station on the earth, and the TV Guide will be as fat as the Manhattan telephone book" — this statement starts off Paik's video *Global Groove* (1973), which surfs different television channels the entire time, mixing music, dancing, and commercials from around the world at different tempi. Its eclectic approach is especially clear in the soundtrack, which mingles rock and pop music as well as Korean instrumental music, Indian drumming, and excerpts from Beethoven symphonies. For the video, Paik also had a troupe of dancers appear on television. The recording was then mixed with footage of traditional Korean dancers and a stripper's feather dance. The video's collage and pastiche structure is edited rhythmically, which is characterized by alternating tempi and abrupt interruptions of the visual sequences. For example, portraits of avant-garde artists such as John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Allen Ginsberg, and Charlotte Moorman suddenly crop up during many of the visual sequences. *Global Groove* is one of the most influential videos of its day; with its editing and mixing techniques it took the manipulation and alteration of television images to a hitherto unknown level. At the same

time, Paik provided an example of how it is possible to use television images creatively without their commercial basis and resituate them in an artistic context. Paik appears in one sequence (*Participation TV*), telling viewers to close their eyes, then open them two thirds of the way, and finally close them again three quarters of the way. This way of addressing the audience lends the work a humorous, ironic accent.

*Global Groove* is a classic video work: its visual material consists of so-called found footage, pre-produced media sequences broadcast on television, now remixed and recombined in different contexts. Bricolage and montages are used explicitly as tools for destroying illusions, along with interference and distortions in the sequencing. The very use of heterogeneous materials in the context of media art outside the mass media was regarded as subversive and was intended to undermine customary modes of perception. Artistic use of found footage from television became possible in the mid-1970s, when the medium of video — in particular the storage and archiving possibilities provided by the video recorder — made it possible to work with television's wealth of material.

The emergence of German video avant-garde in the early 1970s took place in a specific cultural context, which is characterized by two major influences: the politicization of art in general and the critical attitude by artists towards mass media, especially TV. The central motive for artistic work with audiovisual media, especially the new technology of video, was based on their potential to challenge, change, or at least influence the experience of mass media. At the documenta 6 in 1977, artists like Klaus vom Bruch, Marcel Odenbach, or Ulrike Rosenbach were able to proclaim that they had established video as an autonomous form of art, separate from television. From the start however, political and social ambitions were more important than aesthetic or formal experiments with the new technology. The first generation of German video artists were specifically influenced by one central figure: Joseph Beuys. Beuys is perhaps the best example of an artist of the 1960s generation in Germany whose work tried to change society. Rather than adopting a purely formal and aesthetic perception of art, he developed a concept of social sculpture that includes the kind of human action that is directed at structuring and shaping society; Beuys calls it the social organism. When seen in this way, art is not just a material artifact: it is also, and above all, action designed to have social consequences. Beuys's idea of relating artistic creativity to sociopolitical activities revived the social utopias of the historical avant-garde. Beuys himself was not primarily interested in including and using media in this context; however, many post-1960s artists have both addressed media explicitly and used them to pursue concrete sociopolitical aims. They started by assuming that in a society increasingly influenced by media, an (artistic) change of media content or media structures can contribute significantly to democratizing society.

Ulrike Rosenbach, Klaus vom Bruch, and Marcel Odenbach belong to a generation of German artists who became known in the 1970s for their video works without having explored other artistic genres first. Their close relationship, which helped to develop a video scene in Cologne that was exemplary for Germany, is documented in their activities in the ATV Studio (Alternative Television Studio). They were asking on the one hand how much mass media and new technologies are being used for social conditioning, expressed in limitations, restrictions, surveillance, and access control. On the other hand they were examining how these media can be used to create new public and social connections and structures and thus can be turned against the very things they represent.

### Video as a Medium of Emancipation

In the early 1970s a number of female artists started to work with video as a medium. In this context, video was seen as the ideal medium for emancipation from the norms and conventions of representation of a patriarchal society, as it was new and not yet weighed down by social and institutional rules. From a technical point of view, the medium of video allowed artists to work more independently than they had previously done with film. Video, as yet unfettered by the constraints of tradition, immediately became an important means of exposing the social mechanisms by which female identity was constructed and assigned.

From the very start, Ulrike Rosenbach's video performances confront the patriarchal cultural tradition and its image of women, using the media presentation of body images to reflect on the cultural and historical clichés related to stereotypical representations of femininity. A student of Beuys and Kricke, since 1972 she has concentrated entirely on video art. Rosenbach presented her *Naturkreisaktionen* (Natural Circle Actions), the first of her so-called "video-life actions" at the "Between" exhibition in Düsseldorf in 1970 and at the Kunstmarkt in Cologne in 1973. The subject of these first performances, as in *Isolation ist Transparent* (Isolation is Transparent, 1974, sound b/w 8') and in her early video works *Eine Frau ist eine Frau* (A Woman is a Woman, 1972, sound b/w 4') and *Sorry Mister* (1975, sound color 10'), is always the artist herself and her critical examination of women's social and cultural practices of self-presentation and staging. Her spontaneous collaboration with the Berlin-based experimental composer Konrad Schnitzler also plays a role in this connection: in *Videokonzert — Improvisation* (Video Concert — Improvisation, 1973) he accompanied Rosenbach with organ and synthesizers while she felt the shapes of her own body. His electronic compositions often formed the acoustic background for her early video works, conceived without cuts, for example in *Die Perlen dort waren seine Augen*

(The Pearls There Were His Eyes, 1974, sound b/w 10 min with "meditations" by Schnitzler).

Her actions also have a strongly ritual and magical character, as reflected in the use of symbols and materials such as circles, pentagrams, salt, and fire, and in their motifs and form of presentation. Ulrike Rosenbach regards these as used specifically by women to transform natural materials into cultural symbols. They also represent timeless forms of communication. An important role is played by special ritual objects, such as the Sioux mandala in *Der Innere Widerstand sind meine Füße* (The Inner Resistance are my Feet, 1974) and the Australian claves in *Lotus-Knospen-Töne* (Lotus-Buts-Sounds, 1979, sound color 15') in the confrontation between western technologically influenced modes of perception and the earthy, symbolic objects of ancient civilizations used for meditative purposes.

In 1976, after she had moved to Los Angeles and taken a position teaching feminist and video art at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, her video works began to feature themes and stereotypical motifs from the American entertainment industry. In *Aphrodite TV*, a photo series with text taken from a CBS interview broadcast in the summer of 1976, current clichés about women are dismantled once again using personal questions directed at the prominent actresses Liza Minelli, Cher, and Raquel Welch. A similar approach is taken in the series *Venusvision*, showing images used by the advertising and entertainment industries in an attempt to use Venus and her feminine connotations for their own purposes. In her twenty-part color-photo series *Pasadena Rose Parade* (1976), referring to a California New Year's Day parade and a college football game, Rosenbach takes an ironic look at society's patriarchal notion of beauty. In the New Year's event, woman, as the embodiment of youth and beauty, is completely reduced to superficialities and empty poses. In 1975 she created the video work *Madonna of the Flowers* on the same subject.

*Don't Believe I'm an Amazon* (1976) became one of the first classics of German video art history. In this video performance, Rosenbach aims a bow and arrow at a medieval portrait of the Madonna, which for the artist represents the epitome of the idealized image of the woman. It is a critical and experimental work, caught up in a permanent discussion about new ways of representing women in society from a historical backdrop. Beyond the level of self-portrayal, the actions are descriptions of mental states, implicitly reflecting social conditions. And they are the disclosure of Rosenbach's personal makeup. The central aspect of this subject matter is an artistic analysis of the cultural image of the woman in history, for example woman as mother, housewife, prostitute, saint, virgin, or Amazon. *Don't Believe I'm an Amazon* is a live video performance. The Amazon image is identified with the structures of power and competitive behavior in a male-dominated society. Viewers of the video performance see Rosenbach shooting from a distance fifteen arrows at a Madonna reproduction

(*Madonna im Rosenhag* by Stefan Lochner, 1451), and see this on video at the same time. Two video cameras separately record the Madonna reproduction and her face — but both images are shown on one monitor, delicately superimposed, one merging into the other. The video recording is constructed as mental feedback of the artist. The Madonna image — representative, remote, beautiful, gentle, and shy, a cliché traditionally used as a female image, rather vapid — is now part of Rosenbach's persona.<sup>1</sup>

In her performances, Ulrike Rosenbach repeatedly uses quotations from the visual arts, music, and literature, placing them in a metareflexive context in her video art. Thus, when she attempts to fill the projected image of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, she explores advertising's use of the myth of the mother goddess Venus as an embodiment of the erotic. In *Venusdepression — Medusaimagination* (Venus Depression — Medusa Imagination), a performance she gave in 1977 in the Palazzo Strozzi with four other women, Rosenbach drew on depictions of Venus by Titian, Tintoretto, and Allori, and a Caravaggesque head of Medusa to deconstruct the fixed values of these two contrasting images of the feminine. In the video-live performance *Die einsame Spaziergängerin* (The Lonely Walking Woman, 1977), the connection to representational patterns shaped by art history is staged as a media comparison. The performance takes an oversized photographic reproduction of Caspar David Friedrich's *Gebirgslandschaft mit Regenbogen* (Mountain Landscape with Rainbow, 1810) as its point of departure. The artist moves back and forth on the arc of the rainbow, directing the video camera to the center of the circle the rainbow forms. Rosenbach attached a flashlight to her wrist, which illuminated her hands as her fingers drew lines and circles. This repeatedly staged circularity indicates the circular connection between the different levels of the artistic process, the manual aspect of painting and the technical/virtual drawing that creates an image on a screen. The process of appropriating a canonically established image is staged performatively while this very process of performative appropriation is ultimately reproduced as video.

Fundamentally, Rosenbach regards her video art as political feminist practice; video functions as a medium in explicit contrast to mass media as well as to modes of representation shaped by art history. In the 1970s the artist expressed this notion programmatically:

The whole sensitive technical apparatus of our age, in its political dimensions, extends to video technology as well. . . . That is a strange situation. It makes it clear that when one uses the medium of video it must always be done in a political context. . . . In this sense, it is a political medium a priori. It is not biased by art history, like painting; it is politically biased.<sup>2</sup>

Video is not a neutral apparatus, not an unbiased recording medium; rather, it functions as an artistic medium that must fundamentally call into

question the visual depiction of women. Video tests the possibilities and boundaries of changing visual forms and modes of representation; it is a medium of reflection that functions by analyzing hegemonic visual forms. In 1976 Rosenbach ventured a new beginning in Germany, living and working in Cologne. She founded the workgroup "Schule für Kreativen Feminismus" (School for Creative Feminism) and continued her intensive exploration of feminist issues. More photographic works followed, most of them stills from her videotapes: the trilogy *Frauenkultur-Kontaktversuch* (Women's Culture — Contact Attempt, 1977), and *Meine Macht ist meine Ohnmacht* (My Power Is My Powerlessness, 1978). Over and over again her theme is that of the artist tied and caught in a net, as in *Salto Mortale* (1978), often using ensnaring video cables to represent the state of being tied to the technological, as in *Requiem für Mütter* (Requiem for Mothers, 1980) and other works.

Rosenbach's videos aim at altering viewing habits through their sculptural, spatial elements, and, especially beginning in the 1970s, by viewing her videos as an optical extension of her body. Skillfully she plays with viewers' visual habits, thwarting their expectations as television consumers through a pointedly slow tempo, scant use of cuts, and a detailed precision in the sequence of shots, forcing them to consciously open themselves to a different mode of seeing, one in which every alteration can be perceived as something new and exciting. The size of the monitor also plays a role, tailored to each individual work; for example, she integrates her *Frau-Frau* (Woman-Woman, 1977) video, with its whispers at short intervals, into the figure of a colossus in the *Herkules-Herakles-King-Kong-Installation* (1977). In addition, she often uses extremely over- or underexposed images.

In 1980 Ulrike Rosenbach introduced black cardboard as a backdrop for her performances, marking it either with white chalk or with ripping techniques. Like the earlier video camera, the chalk drawings, which she usually executes with big swings of her arms, represent the optical extension of her body (for example her *Judofrauen haben als Hilfe Boten* [Judo-Women Get Help by Couriers, 1981]). While her video-life actions conveyed a ritual atmosphere, largely due to her dressing completely in white or black and performing actions with fire, salt, and musical instruments, now she increasingly began to integrate mythological and cosmic elements (*Eva und Adam* [Eve and Adam, 1982/83] and *Das Feenband* [The Fairy Tape, 1983]). Her theme is still the definition of the feminine, but now in ritual connection with the male principle (*Die Eulenspieglerin* [The Female Eulenspiegel, 1985]). Rosenbach's videos display the revocation, the rejection of the coherent visibility and clichéd representation of the female body. However, this is not done primarily in order to avoid voyeuristic reception, but rather to counter a receptive attitude known in film theory terminology as "suture." The term refers to the technically

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evoked illusionistic identification with what is shown, achieved especially through the impression of coherence and closure. Instead Rosenbach's works display a formal aesthetic interest in a different way of representing body images that is undermined by a performative restaging. In this way she fills a gap between performative presentation and media recording methods, between the revelation and concealment of the body and its masked representation, between the availability and revocation of what is shown. This underlying subversive trait of her videos can be regarded as the true point of reference to performative aesthetics. This is the case even though the action or performance forming the basis of the recordings is subordinated to her aesthetic aim of staging images or image sequences. Rosenbach stages the female body using estranged images of motion, with an altered and extended radius of actions. The space in which this action takes place is the virtual, technically manipulated space provided by the medium of video. Thus her works are based not on the aesthetic premise of a previously existing and immediate physicality, which technical media can record but not adequately capture, but in fact on the explicit interaction of physical acts with technical conditions and potential. For only the technical apparatus creates the extended space for movement and thus representation. This enables the expansion of the action and the realization of the alternative possibilities for visualizing physical movements.

In the process the image space of the video acquires a scope without a fixed or stable outer boundary, one that permits crossing and shifting actions, with the consequence that the parameter of the self-presentation is weakened, while the images acquire a politically motivated value of their own. Consequently the often emphasized aspects of self-presentation and self-mirroring, and thus the exploration of artistic or female identity, do not fade into the background of the work. In contrast to the classic mirror situation, the video is not used predominantly as a monitor for staging a self-image or portrait but as a medium for producing changing, mobile images of the body that subvert conventional visual patterns. At the same time, this aesthetic strategy, which is linked with the use of the technical apparatus, should not be confused with a tendency toward a new aesthetization of the body: rather, it is the realization of an artistic concept that attempts to link theatrical actions closely with the politically motivated production of images.

## Deconstructing Television

In the mid-1970s, video artists began to reference their work against the mass medium television, with explicit political intent. In 1975, Klaus vom Bruch, together with Marcel Odenbach and Ulrike Rosenbach, founded the Cologne video studio ATV, Alternativ Television. It was based on the



idea of developing a medium with high artistic standards as a critical response to existing German television. The video productions were conceived as a form of opposition to the aesthetic and content of the official television stations, a kind of private cultural television that for brief periods was broadcast from the studio into the immediate vicinity (it could be received over a radius of a few hundred meters). Characteristically, Klaus vom Bruch's first video was called *Die Entführung eines Kunsthändlers ist keine Utopie mehr* (The Kidnapping of an Art Dealer Is Not a Utopia Any More, 1975). The camera focuses on a toy model with a machine gun in a slow panning shot while the theme song from the film *The Pink Panther* is heard in the background. Using minimal effects and drawing largely on elements of pop culture, the work creates an irresistible tension. The video presents the ironic, self-reflective reconstruction of a heroic scene that alludes to the espionage film genre. To a still greater extent, the aspect of repetition is central to Klaus vom Bruch's video aesthetic. His works draw their material from television images, especially television's journalistic and historical documents.

It should be emphasized that the video work *Das Schleyerband I/II* (The Schleyer Tape I/II) by Klaus von Bruch consists entirely of television material stemming from the period between September 1977 and June 1978. The work is a collage taken from approximately thirty hours of various television broadcasts, including Dutch and Belgian programs. With the help of an antenna installed on the roof of his Cologne studio, vom Bruch was able to receive and record, for example, a Belgian army station for soldiers stationed in Germany. The television material covers the most explosive events surrounding the kidnapping and murder of the German industrial manager and president of the federal employers' association Hans Martin Schleyer, marking one of German terrorism's most intense and violent phases. It ranges from Schleyer's hostage-taking and murder to the hijacking of the Lufthansa plane "Landshut," its liberation by a special commando in Mogadishu and the deaths of Red Army Faction (RAF) terrorists Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, and Jan Carl Raspe. The television programs are recycled according to the principle of a time-displaced chronology (TV footage recorded between September 1977 and June 1978), including footage from airports in Dubai, reports by journalists, interviews in and outside television studios, and excerpts from the first press conference after the deaths of the terrorists Baader, Ensslin, and Raspe in Stuttgart's Stammheim prison. Made before the general availability of domestic VCRs, *Das Schleyerband I/II* transposed the events and their coverage from the context of television to that of art, in order to subject them to a renewed, possibly more intensive, consideration. Today the documents reflect a long-obsolete television aesthetic, placing it in an immediate political context, especially given the historical remove. Above all, they document the statements of politicians and government spokesmen,

which are juxtaposed with discussions of fundamental political attitudes, emphasizing how West German society was split into different camps during this period. In particular, the video plays on the publicizing of mug shots of terrorists and the photographs of the kidnapping victims in the mass media, exposing the clichéd manner in which the profiles and facial features were disseminated in the public sphere. In the video the accentuation of details such as freckles, warts, bulging lips, and oversized Adam's apples in the perpetrator profiles and mug shots emerges as a visual strategy of the mass media to stereotype the terrorists and prevent a more nuanced discussion of their motifs. Other scenes pay direct homage to the idea of the failed revolution, as when a multi-verse protest song is used as background music. Music plays a contrasting role in a number of visual sequences: the melodies are often interrupted, and verbal shorthand is integrated into the soundtrack. These minimal interventions into the existing material are typical for vom Bruch's working methods; in later works, such as *Das Duracellband* (The Duracell Tape, 1980), he also worked with a collage of visual materials altered with a very few interventions. Thus *Das Schleyerband I/II* operates with simple oppositions, as when the mug shots of the terrorists are juxtaposed with television images of pop stars. This minimalist recycling method is based entirely on the principle of the time-displaced alteration of found footage from the medium of television. The recycling of mass-media images, in particular television images, and the use of existing visual materials go back largely to the influence of John Baldessari, whom the artist visited in California in the mid-1970s. Thus vom Bruch assumes a fundamentally different mode of reception and aesthetics for the videos in opposition to mass-media TV, one that he uses as a source of artistic inspiration. At the same time, he trusts that these mass-media images will be subjected to a fundamentally critical, indeed oppositional analysis in the artistic context. Social opposition and media criticism emerge as signature themes of the early video works, culminating in the idea of an alternative, indeed utopian artists' television. In this context it is also noteworthy that vom Bruch presents *Das Schleyerband I/II* only in its entirety and, if possible, on a television of a certain format in selected galleries or, more recently, museums.

*As If Memories Could Deceive Me* is a key video work by Marcel Odenbach from the mid-1980s, one that paradigmatically displays the central themes of his video oeuvre, which focus on the ability of the media to construct history, memory, and identity. The work was commissioned by the Goethe Institute Boston and was the first work that Odenbach produced in close collaboration with television. It exists in two versions: a television film shown as part of the *Kleines Fernsehspiel* broadcast by Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF)<sup>3</sup> and as a video installation shown on three video monitors mounted on pedestals. The installation draws entirely on film and musical material from the television broadcast.

In *As if Memories Could Deceive Me*, a piano keyboard, symbol of German bourgeois tradition, is the metaphorical ground upon which Odenbach devises a dynamic associative discourse on the construction of personal and cultural identity. A haunted theater of collective and subjective memory is constructed from archival film and mass media representations. Signifiers of German history and cultural heritage — Wagnerian opera, Hitler's rallies, the Nuremberg trials, Bavarian folk dancers — are orchestrated and conjoined on the screen with male-fashion iconography and autobiographical references. From ornate nineteenth century baroque architecture to a contemporary menswear emporium, the artist traces a historical trajectory of cultural excess. Confronting his bourgeois German past, Odenbach achieves a personal history that questions the construction of identity within this cultural context. The video documents a performance or rehearsal of the New England Conservatory Symphony Orchestra, through close-ups, split-screen effects, and collage techniques. Instruments are filmed in close-up and appear in boxed-off portions of the screen. As the music rises, archival film images begin to creep in. Many times they are superimposed over the instruments. The original footage produced for this work, commissioned by the German Goethe Institute, was shot at the New England Conservatory of Music, the Goethe Institute, and a clothing store. Robert Schumann's *Manfred*, and *Drum and Gong Sounds*, by F. Marschall and U. Timmermann, are the musical works performed by the New England Conservatory Symphony Orchestra.

The seventeen-minute-long film is distinguished in particular by the nuanced montage technique whose dream logic is referenced in the central section of the video through the recurring motif of a sleeping boy. The division of the screen into three vertical fields emerges as an opportunity for multiperspectival presentation, as when it shows the musicians entering the concert hall and tuning their instruments and the camerawork encompassing the entire room in one calm, expansive, circular motion. Yet the video's themes are not reflected only in the images of the American symphony orchestra. The choice of one of the pieces is rich with associations as well: the overture to Robert Schumann's *Manfred*, based on a poem by Lord Byron, tells of the fatal inner conflicts of its young hero. This reference plays on the theme of identity, which only truly takes shape in the second part of the video, set against a historical backdrop. Here the focus is the montage of film citations within the constant image of a concert piano. In rapid sequence, images of Gothic Madonnas, scenes of actors in historical films, and film material from the Nazi era is shown over or under the keyboard. Here, too, one repeatedly sees the figure of the boy sleeping over the piano, while additional sequences of images are projected above his head. The conclusion of the work features more allusions to the norms and standards of bourgeois high culture: the scenes showing the orderly

display of goods in a classy men's clothing store shows the way in which supposedly individual self-presentations are regulated by fashion.

Odenbach compiled the film footage used in the video from a number of different sources, piecing it together using chiefly montage and cutting techniques. Only limited historical material was initially at Odenbach's disposal: the only images on location at the Goethe Institute derived from the realm of German high culture and history. For images of the Nazi era the artist found film passages in the archive of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute in Boston. This combination of personal, social, and historical dimensions of experience is typical of Odenbach, yet it also carries on the tradition of the political collage as developed by prominent German modern artists such as John Heartfield and Hannah Höch in the 1920s and 1930s. For Odenbach, the political function of video is his central motivation for choosing that medium.

In an interview from 1999 he explained:

The choice of video as a medium was partly a political one. This political aspect had a strong influence on me. In Africa, for example, I have seen that young artists are set on working with media because they can function subversively. I see this motivation as similar to that of many artists in the early 1970s. Here and now video has lost that function somewhat, but I believe the medium as such, due in part to the fact that it is available to everyone, can still play a very strong progressive role.<sup>4</sup>

In *As if Memories Could Deceive Me* Marcel Odenbach shows that he is a master of the montage, and a politically attuned border-crosser between the medial image archives of television and video. But in Odenbach's work — especially since the 1990s — the historical and pop-cultural archive material provided by television is more than just a distant, critically questioned point of reference. In a video clip to the music of the band *Weep Not Child — Je Ka Bere*, Marcel Odenbach's imagery of fragmented and contrasted image fields, which he developed in various videos in the 1980s, references the rap's musical techniques of *Sprechgesang* and sampling. Structured in three scenes, the clip combines the theme of emigration and cultural difference with a high-energy adaptation of Afro-American styles, thus, in a sense, reaching the pop-cultural mainstream of music-video production.

Odenbach's work is a perfect example of how the transition from monitor presentation to room installation developed in the 1980s. On the threshold to digital production, video established itself as a visual art while also being used for documentary recordings. The specific presentation formats of *As if Memories Could Deceive Me* speaks for the differentiated reception of video art, which lays claim to the indisputable status of artistic work in large part through being exhibited in museums. Against the background of the 1980s zeitgeist, which in Germany includes phenomena such as the advent of private television, the controversial national census, the Neue

Deutsche Welle, and punk rock, video's genuinely socially critical, democratic, and utopian dimension came to prominence in the years before German reunification.

For both Klaus vom Bruch and Marcel Odenbach, reflections regarding the difference between the media of video and television raise political issues. In contrast to the mass medium of television, video is regarded as socially, economically, and politically untainted; the new medium offers the possibility of direct intervention, subversion, and critical manipulation of the visual material and discourses of the established mass media of film and above all television. Both artists draw radical conclusions from their representations of archival, cinematic, and documentary TV material that reexamine the relationship between the personal and the political, between German history and private testimony. Both the deconstruction of found visual material from the mass media of film and television and the establishment of alternative channels of production and distribution with the new medium of video are intended to fulfill the vision of a new democratic and artistic communication medium. As a medium that is still largely untainted in a social, artistic, political, and economic sense, video and the continuing innovations in its technology emerge as an essential alternative to the established mass media, one that is expected to contribute to the democratization of society. This analytical deconstruction of mass media images is accompanied by the recontextualization of their forms of presentation; that is, the altered artistic or institutional context in which video art is shown contributes crucially toward the altered way in which it is received.

In a statement from 1977, Odenbach accordingly locates the development of his video aesthetic within the tradition of political art and in distinction to the mass medium of television:

Because video encompasses three different elements for demonstrating the power of technology and social progress, a) the image, b) action sequences and c) sound, because the television image speaks more to today's visual habits than the picture on the wall, because television as a pastime with high entertainment value has triggered social, that is to say political changes "on a grand scale," because media analysis and criticism has become a central issue of our society, because I can theoretically reach a larger audience than that of museum visitors, because my visual presentation can no longer be used as decorative, wall decorations with snob appeal, because art loses part of its commodity character, because I can create a wider range of alternatives!<sup>5</sup>

### Utopian Aesthetics and Post-utopian Strategies

In the 1970s and 1980s the exploration of television images was dominated by progressive, political intentions. Analysis focused on the construction

and manipulative potential of images disseminated publicly and through the mass media. In the process, the information content of the television images was examined just as critically as it was ultimately dissociated in the adaptation process. A crucial role was played by the de- and reassembly of the visual material using sophisticated visual and editing techniques. Artists processed and combined the found media images in order to subject them to a renewed mediatization. The reflexivity specific to video was intended to release critical potential and contribute to a process of democratization in society. Along with the analytical processing of television materials, there were also attempts to develop new forms of broadcasting and producing, especially on the part of artists' groups trying to establish both the video and self-produced alternative television programs as a democratic alternative to the mass media.

The video works by Ulrike Rosenbach, Klaus vom Bruch, and Marcel Odenbach formulate elaborate analyses and critiques not only of mass media and art, in the narrow sense, but of politics and culture in the broader sense. Their topics refer to the relationship of the artists with post-war German society, by recycling found footage from the televised archive. They were also part of a "social movement" in Germany, which sought a new fusion of social policy and artistic practice in the zeitgeist of the 1970s and under the influence of German critical aesthetic theories (Benjamin, Adorno, and Bloch). In the 1970s the most important of the television-related post-utopian strategies were the analytical deconstruction of the mass medium using the resources of art; an approach to television that abandons the exclusivity of artistic purism to some extent; the subversive strategy of artistic occupation of niches in the expanding media landscape; and a direct cooperation with television to develop innovative media techniques. This term post-utopian strategy thus describes the aesthetics of the "Videorebels," the German artistic video avant-garde, which is to be distinguished from the radicalism of Debord's situationalism. Many media art projects of that period regarded video as a new medium free of rigid rules and traditions and thus an ideal medium for emancipation from the influence of mass media. Ulrike Rosenbach, Klaus vom Bruch, and Marcel Odenbach are working toward a new function for mass media, changing the representational processes and visual languages of film and above all television. At the same time most of their videos are aimed at linking personal and social experience. German video practice in the 1970s thus rather stresses Beuys's understanding of art and politics as influencing the social organism in a way that does not seek to negate the distinction between theory and practice but rather aspires to social change that affects the culture of everyday life. And ultimately, behind this idea there lies the hope that art can contribute significantly to democratizing society. A hope that remains visible, although the end of the 1968 utopias is stated as a fact, almost with resignation, in the works of the "Videorebels."

<sup>1</sup> Ulrike Rosenbach, "Video als Medium der Emanzipation," in *Videokunst in Deutschland, 1963–1982*, ed. Wulf Herzogenrath (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 1982), 99–102; here, 102. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> Rosenbach, "Video als Medium der Emanzipation," 104.

<sup>3</sup> ZDF is a public-service German television channel based in Mainz. It is run as an independent non-profit agency established by joint contract between the German federal states (*Bundesländer*). ZDF is funded by a television licence. *Das Kleine Fernsehspiel* is an alternative broadcasting space for experimental film work.

<sup>4</sup> Interview 5 Feb. 1999, Hans Belting and Marcel Odenbach, in *Marcel Odenbach: Ach, wie gut, daß niemand weiß*, ed. Udo Kittelmann, catalogue created by the Kölnischer Kunstverein (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 1999), 58.

<sup>5</sup> Marcel Odenbach, quoted in Slavko Kacunko, *Marcel Odenbach: Konzept, Performance, Video, Installation* (Mainz and Munich: Chorus, 1999), 168.

## 5: Media in the Interim: Independent Film in East Germany before and after 1989

*Claus Löser*

AFTER THE EXPATRIATION OF SINGER-SONGWRITER Wolf Biermann in the fall of 1976 a generation of artists articulated themselves increasingly in opposition to the GDR government; their stance toward the regime differed from that of the older generation of prominent writers, such as Christa Wolf, Stefan Heym, or Stefan Hermlin, who also signed a petition in support of Biermann. For those born after 1940, the GDR no longer represented the better Germany, born out of war, anti-fascist activism, and the spirit of a self-sacrificial new beginning. Instead of having chosen this socialist ideology consciously, the younger artists saw themselves as a generation that was "born into" (Uwe Kolbe) this society and thus had no choice but to deal with it. Members of this generation had no difficulty in distancing themselves from the state, in contrast to their older colleagues, whom they perceived all too often as aligned with the government. They searched for new cultural focal points and found them in the officially disdained "late-bourgeois" art as well as in contemporary Western modernity. Such reorienting occurred in all areas of art production. By the early 1980s the formerly impenetrable legitimating system for the cultural policy of the state began to erode. Independent galleries were founded, such as *Eigen + Art* in Leipzig, galleries that exhibited politically and/or aesthetically problematic artists, including those who would not have been accepted into the official GDR "League of Visual Artists," or who were in fact preparing for their departure from the GDR to the FRG. Literature and magazines that would probably not have met with the approval of the state were self-published in miniscule editions. Punk bands performed for two or three gigs or appeared under constantly changing names, without, of course, seeking the official performance permit. A uniquely interdisciplinary character distinguished the independent GDR art scene: painters performed improvised music, poets transposed their own texts into graphics, musicians became performance artists. It was only a matter of time before artists in search of yet uncharted territories would explore the medium of film.