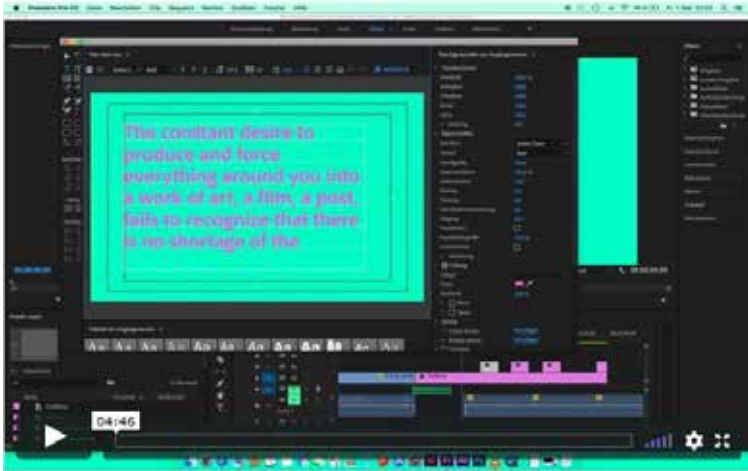


CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

Andree Korpys and Markus Löffler, *Can and must we make film now?* (2020), frame enlargement. Courtesy the Oberhausen Small Film Festival.

Dietrich Brüggemann, *Can and must we make film now?* (2020), frame enlargement. Courtesy the Oberhausen Small Film Festival.

Brenda Lien, *Can and must we make film now?* (2020), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.



CAN AND MUST WE MAKE FILM NOW?

Moving images, emergency and production porn from virtual Oberhausen

“Nothing will be the same as before, not for cinema, not for festivals, not for us, not for society. We want to talk about that.” These were the auspices under which the 66th Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen opened. The solemn words come from Director Lars Henrik Gass’ inaugural short,¹ which set the tone of the event and suggested the approach to an online festival adopted by Kurzfilmtage. Much (virtual) ink and many pages have been spent considering the OL festival as a phenomenon, so my observations are aimed at a subtler space for thought: I wish to focus on the *how* rather than the *what*.

While the move to the online environment as a reaction to the global health crisis has been the solution selected for many other film festivals, doing so not as a replacement but as an

opening to construct a critical space for reflection is a different tactic. The 2020 edition of Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen has been built around the decision to stop and consider the circumstances as a unique moment in time to grow and raise self-awareness. To transfer content designed for a different format into a new environment is a massive endeavor, but doing it *mindfully* is what makes the difference. Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen made the difference.

I term Gass’ decision *mindful* because it demonstrated a realistic sense of both the possibilities and the limitations of the digital format, an awareness encapsulated in the small program *Can and Must We Make Films Now?* (*Kann und muss man jetzt Filme machen?*).

Modest in dimensions and yet unique in concept, the program consisted of 12 films commissioned from German directors, now all available on the festival Vimeo account (see www.vimeo.com/kurzfilmtage). Each filmmaker received a budget equivalent to the standard fee for a psychotherapy session in Germany to produce a video entitled *Kann und muss man jetzt Filme machen?* Maximum production time allowed was one hour. This small program may have gone unnoticed and little watched, with most of the films in German without subtitles, but it is particularly meaningful as an experiment to interrogate the circumstances of the festival and while challenging them experimentally. Rather than merely representing experimental filmmakers and presenting their cinematic works, Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen's approach is in itself experimental.

The artist duo Andree Korpys/Markus Löffler took up the challenge creatively, centering their contribution on sound. In their video, a girl and a woman stand in a sunny field next to a fake antenna, obsessively repeating the words “*nichts*” and “*alles*” (“*nothing*” and “*everything*”), while they mimic the act of catching some signals. The noise of radio waves overrides and complements the chorus of words, while a layer of grey and white pixels occasionally obscures the image, hinting at dysfunction in the transmission. The whole scene conveys a sense of isolation, the attempt to connect and the confusion coming out of it offering an efficacious pragma-poetic view of communication and information flows during the pandemic.

The program explicitly avoids the rhetoric of confinement-induced hyperproductivity, expressed in a brief the festival provided to the selected filmmakers: given a payment equivalent to the standard fee for a psychotherapy session in Germany, each had to employ the budget to produce a video that would require no longer than an hour in total production time. In a moment of exceptional and overwhelming abundance of audiovisual materials online, Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen interjects the atmosphere and the debates raised by the global health crisis and looks beyond them in the direction of the more systemic organization of overflowing cultural production.

Embracing a more activist approach, Brenda Lien pairs social engagement and introspective exploration in her interpretation of the task. Following up on previous projects, *Call of Beauty* (2016), *Call of Cuteness* (2017), *Call of Comfort* (2010), her reflection focuses on the activities of creative labor favored by the lockdown: coming back to old projects left on hold, archiving, reordering, completing. In all cases the sentiment that emerges is that of forcing oneself into efficiency at all costs. “My worth as a human being” – she concludes – “is measured by my productivity.”

In this context, originality and spontaneity are in question, as the film by Jens Pecho also documents. The piece adopts desktop computer interface aesthetics, like many works falling under the emerging genre of what I have termed “desktop cinema.” It superimposes the familiar small screen of the work station on a virtual big screen, in a short circuit that highlights how

the push for experimentation inevitably remixes and questions many traditional concepts that structured cinema in its earlier celluloid life, such as authorship, spectatorship etc. At the same time, Pecho's work underscores how everyone has gained some form of digital literacy during the pandemic, empowering people to express themselves, but also feeding the hyper-production discourse.

Dietrich Brüggemann also addresses this point in his *Can and must we make film now?* piece. Produced with his mobile, the artist's choice to refrain from prerecorded phone-footage and to shoot without pre-scripting, within a domestic environment, in front of a mirror, reinforces the meditative style of the film, in which the flow of thoughts pings from the author to his image, back to the mirror camera of the phone, and last to the spectator as in a kaleidoscope effect. The repetitions and multiple reverberations of the image respond appropriately to the questions asked in that they convey the unstoppable, exhausting, global and systematic “productivity porn”, which characterized the lockdown months. Asking whether it is really *necessary* to make films in a moment like this addresses the late capitalist system we inhabit, and returns, once again, to the value of creativity, time and emotional labor, moving the emphasis from mere quantity or production for the sake of production, to the quality and legitimacy of what is produced. Again, with Brüggemann: “one *can* make films and yet one *must not necessarily* make them, sometimes it is ok to just let it go” (my translation).

In an essay expressing her frustration—which I share—with the abundance of audiovisual materials made available online, Erika Balsom observed that “what is always at stake is nothing less than the collapse of a certain kind of aesthetic experience.”² To me, it is perhaps not only the aesthetic experience of cinema that is lost but the blissful sense of cinema as a human experience. Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen is in its people, in the magic random encounters between spectators, artists, filmmakers, archivists, amateurs, researchers, curators and selectors. It is the unique opportunity to interrogate reality that one experiences when embedded, implicated, scandalized, fascinated, interpellated by it.

Can and must we make film now? is a demand for a more human dimension, as if beyond the aesthetic experience of movie watching, Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen calls for a revamping of an ethics of experiencing cinema for what it is—the most amazing, imperfect, human art.

MIRIAM DE ROSA

Footnotes and hyperlinks:
www.mfj-online.org/derosa-oberhausen-notes/

