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Minor Cinema:
Experimental Film in Switzerland

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Many resources collected during the research project "Schweizer Filmexperimente 1950–1988," including more than 20 interviews with filmmakers and curators as audio-files and transcripts, are also available on this website.

You can contribute to the "Minor Cinema" research project if you have additional material. Please contact the researchers through the website.

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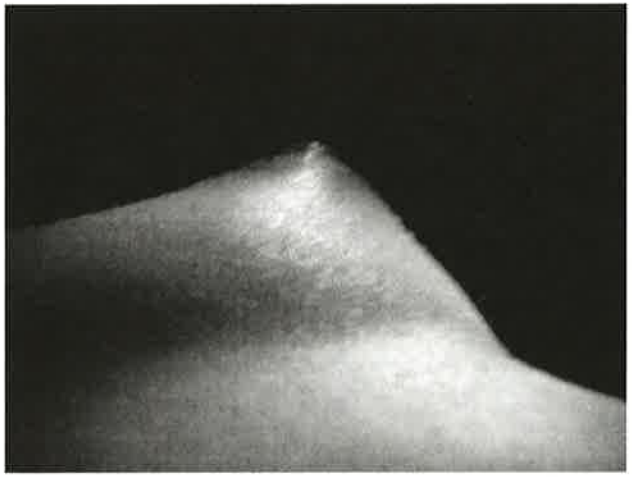
Ute Holl

Translated from the German by Steven Lindberg



Bernd Fiedler and Balz Raz, *Parallaxe*, 1986 (Switzerland)
16mm film, 90 minutes

Hors d'oeuvre: Sources and Materials, Wine and Hot Dogs

Experimental films are not simply cinematic; rather they are spatial arts, performances, milieus, territorial occupations. Like performances, they negotiate the connection between theatricality and politics.[1] Experimental films are operative films, even if sometimes they have no plan. Texts about experimental films are, in turn, like travel guides—they promise all sorts of things, but also give the feeling there is nothing authentic or essential to be said. They call attention to the fact that experience, whether artistic or political, can only be described with difficulty, and cannot be reproduced. All writing reveals a lack of aesthetic experience, it fails to capture the color of images, the haptic quality of light, the smell of projector lamps, the noise of projecting Super-8 and 16mm films in galleries, back rooms, squatted

buildings, at night, toward morning, in smoke-filled rooms in which everyone is talking at once, amateurs and artists, budding talent and tough guys. It is unclear what a criticism of this cinema should focus on—materials, techniques, screenings, or the influence that these films had on cinema in general? The aesthetics of experimental film deals, first of all, with the specific, the artisan, the haptic, and the tactile, not only on every reel, but also on every poster, every printed page, every typed note on the film. This was also true for experimental film in Basel. Page six of *Filmfront* no. 3 reads:

> Film festival at the Litfass-Säule, Bläsiring 19, Basel. Filmmakers from Basel show their films, Saturday, August 26, from 6.30 pm. Free admission. Anyone who wants to take a break from the film marathon can relax in the gallery with wine, beer, and hot dogs. ASSOCIATION FOR INDEPENDENT FILM (VUF).

This reveals another problem with the sources of experimental films: just as films have a particular format, texts about these films are marked by their typography—typewriter and offset printing. The poster of the typed announcement for the film festival was mounted on an advertising column or "Litfass-Säule"—the very name of the venue. It was illustrated with comic-style sketches—1978 was the time of Claire Bretécher and Gerhard Seyfried—and it also called for artists and critics to send in their articles: "Please submit print-ready entries (typed in as dark a print as possible, with a three-centimeter left margin, drawings are most suitable for illustrations)." Pound on the keys, comrade, it said, for "print-ready" did not simply refer to the words, and send it to: "FILMFRONT work group and distribution, Post Office Box 123, CH 4020 Basel." AG Film said hello to Billy Wilder. Work group meant association, network, a public yet closed community, secret society, craft federation, cooperative, "union,"[2] inclusive and exclusive. This also applied to their form of production, which signaled both exclusivity and exhibitionism—*cinéma copain*, *cinema povera*, art film, underground film, experimental film, independent film, a united front against commercialism, and everything in the first person: "In the beginning

was not Adam, in the beginning was me," Christian Meyer wrote in the first issue of *Filmfront*. "My qualities and characteristics are reflected in my films."[3] In the beginning, in Basel as elsewhere, was Narcissus, the man, his optical apparatuses, his water for self-reflection, and the many men who peer into it. The program for the Bläsiring did not contain a single film by a woman, but some are sure to have dropped by to enter the darkness of the film marathon and the light of the gallery, in search of wine and beer, to eat hot dogs and criticize films. I know a few women from Basel. They are bold and sharp and leave nothing without comment. The documents produced by the young men, aged around 20 or 25, as they proudly point out in *Filmfront*, were not, in any case, intended for eternity: while the university library in Basel did have the first issue of the journal properly bound, the page numbers in the margin have been cut off. None of it can be cited in a traditional scholarly fashion. Everything has to be read like material from an unreliable source. From the second issue onward, the page numbers are at the bottom of the page, there is a three-centimeter margin, room for notes by typists, women, and others present. But can one write about experimental film from Basel at all, when one has not been part of the experience, as an outsider, from offscreen, using faded offset sources and faded memories? What would a good document about experimental cinema actually look like?

From what perspective can one write about experimental film at all? Especially when avant-garde film itself aims to avoid central perspectives and practices a nondirectional gaze. In *New American Cinema*, people like Jonas Mekas and Stan Brakhage were carefully read by the *Filmfront* people in Basel. "Imagine an eye, unruled by man-made laws of perspective," Brakhage wrote paradigmatically, "an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything, but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception."[4] Adventures of the eyes, experiments in perception were made in the 1970s and 1980s, and these films preserve these experiences much as old records hold memories—every time you play them, the sound changes, and after 30 or 40 years you hear everything differently. Old experimental films viewed on DVD have a different

effect than when seen on the original material; the soundtrack sounds different through today's headphones than it did at Kleinbasel's music scene by night in the old days—which today also looks different, tidier and cleaned up. How, then, is a non-Adam "I" supposed to write about it, and what is more, on a computer, on which the force of the keystroke does not matter, a computer that is not only capable of simulating all the typographers in the world at once, but which can also invite 500 people to a gallery in one go, that does not need to gather an audience for experimental film because it has networking, a computer that can play the digitized experimental films from Basel whenever it wants to? And to make it authentic, I could always smoke a cigarette while watching. I am writing from far away, both in time and space.

This is not a journey, not a tour, not of Basel, not of its film scenes, nor its crazy ego trips. The "I" of the critic has its doubts as to whether it is even possible to write a scholarly survey about the Basel experimental film scene. Its methodological framework and genealogy are marked by the films themselves, which are clearly in the tradition of Aleksandr Medvedkin, Sergei Eisenstein, and the Dziga Vertov Group. They are also in the tradition of Mekas, Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, and Peter Kubelka, and include films that follow the concept of social movements, in the context of film cooperatives, whose forms, semiotics, and aesthetics of reception have already been accurately reconstructed.[5] In the tradition of the Nouvelle Vague, the Basel filmmakers themselves engaged in writing. With *Filmfront,* the title of which was taken from Ernst Bloch, there was a conceptual approach from the outset. But even if those films point to their own genealogies, appeal to traditions and styles, they are in no way imitative. There is a form of obstinacy, held as a virtue in Basel, which is also difficult to describe. Therefore, this chapter cannot merely talk of a few individuals, two or three post office boxes or addresses. To a certain extent, its task is to reconstruct experimental film in Basel, during the 1970s and 1980s, as seen from the moon, *vista della luna*, from beyond the border, from offscreen.

Hors-Mémoire—The Margins of Memory

On the program of the Videoforum held in Freiburg im Breisgau, in 1988, among the many films on social movements and the aesthetics of resistance that I recall, there was one film that I remember well—*Japsen* (1988) by Muda Mathis and Pipilotti Rist. In the 1980s they were both in René Pulfer's class at the Höhere Schule für Gestaltung in Basel (School of Design), exploring what video was and could be.[6] Everything in their work was unbelievably different—what sort of creatures were these that breathed, stumbled, turned, and buzzed around, with their beautiful moon- and camera eyes? With their crazy jokes on screen that poked fun at God and the world, not to mention their music, every note of which was taken seriously and cracked like a circus whip? Rhythm and Les Reines Prochaines.[7] Only 30 years later do I realize that these were images that send cameras and mixers to the margins, and yet, also belong to the science of cinema, viewed from the perspective of video and its art forms. The Basel videos construct video dances, just as Maya Deren and Yvonne Rainer made filmic dances. At the same time, they negotiate femininity and feminism in the history of film. *Japsen* does so in five chapters: Madness, Hysteria, Flight, Love, and Laughter. First, at its center is the knee, which, of course, has no center, and a red stocking and boot shot in front of a green meadow and woods, and then again in an endless panning shot. Second: images of women are clear references to the images of hysteria produced at the hôpital de la Salpêtrière, standing for hybrid women's bodies, sex controlled through chronophotography. Third: a party for technology girls. Fourth: homage to the baroque, music, and math, and then, fifth, while the old laboratory camera addressed the eye, video filming involves the whole body in shooting and observing. In all cases, boundaries are transgressed in passing, video lines are overwritten, and the memory is made while shooting—a voluntary memory, and feminist.

The forgetful "I" of the critic was able to repeat that in Basel in 2016, at VIA, on Amerbachstrasse, parallel to the Bläsiring, a "random marriage of convenience" where people work on films, show videos, organize events, and establish archives. This is where *Japsen* can be found, along

with *Die Tempodrosslerin saust* (*The Speed Throttler Chokes*, 1990), but not currently *Messer im Kompott* (*Knife in the Compote*, 1988) by Muda Mathis and Käthe Walser, as the archive is being remodeled, in cooperation with Bildwechsel, another feminist film center located in Hamburg, founded in the 1980s at Rostockerstrasse 25. Chris Regn is the flying mediator, performer, and artist who brought the network together and who distributes the art. It is easier to remember on an external hard drive what one forgets internally: videos from Basel are feminist, but in unforeseen ways. After all, the center is called VIA and not EVE. What these people like best is rotating the camera, mounted on all sorts of turntables so that it becomes eccentric in the literal sense of the word and not simply centrifugal. André Bazin claimed that film images were centripetal, unlike painting and its tableaux:

> The picture frame polarizes space inward. On the contrary, what the screen shows us seems to be part of something prolonged indefinitely into the universe. A frame is centripetal, the screen centrifugal.[8]

A third space is being created here—neither a mask nor a frame, but a space for rendering visible something that is not really conceived for the eye. These are films with no *hors-champ*,[9] films that create their own immanent, exclusive, stubborn, and cheerful worlds. Nothing here is indebted to a school, even though the audiovisual design class founded by Pulfer and Enrique Fontanilles at the Schule für Gestaltung in Basel did lead to crucial changes, and not only there. Nothing in the videos of that class recalls the works of those young men who founded independent film in the back room of a bar in Basel in the 1970s. Indeed, young as those filmmakers might have been then, they were still ten years older than Les Reines Prochaines and other video princesses. But they once shared a common address. *Filmfront*, the journal of the VUF, or AFI in French (*Association pour le Film Indépendant*), ascetic, manifesto-like, conceptually difficult, and presented in the language of historical materialism, was, from the third issue on also for sale in Germany, in Hamburg, at Rostockerstrasse 25, for 3 Deutsche Marks. At the precise place where the paths of VIA and Bildwechsel cross. The price of the first issue of

Filmfront was, by the way, "4 CHF, 4 DM, 4 F" for Switzerland, Germany, and France. Basel definitely has more borders than Hamburg, and hence also more *hors-champs*.

Hors-Champ and Offscreen: The Blind Spot of the Visible

The offscreen is an invisible power or, more precisely, the power of the invisible. What is visible in cinema, French film theory insists, is merely an imaginary mirror of the field beyond the mask, the *hors-champ*, which is made up of all that has been excluded: "the collection of elements (characters, settings, etc.) that, while not being included in the image itself, are nonetheless connected to that visible space in an imaginary fashion for the spectator."[10] Whatever "I" append to an experimental film with pen or keyboard is also merely the resonance of something imaginary that I see from a distance, with a delay: on the screen, monitor, in films, with an eye to that which is missing because it is offscreen. What of the excluded can be seen here? Where can we perceive the reality of the "not included"? The answer to that question is also a lesson to be learned from Basel filmmakers and their cooperatives.

Clemens Klopfenstein, a student at the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Applied Arts) in Basel from 1962 to 1965, a precursor of the *Filmfront* people, and hence the avant-garde properly speaking, had also begun filming in a project group, with Urs Aebersold and Philip Schaad. His experiments with light and lighting demonstrate that experimental cinema does not simply film the excluded, but can actually reveal what previously failed to appear in the field of the visible. In 1978, long after he had vanished into the Italian Off, Klopfenstein filmed *Geschichte der Nacht* (*Story of the Night*) with high-speed film stock that was developed in photochemical laboratories. On his journey through European nights, Klopfenstein filmed the margins of cities, of societies, of the continent, and even of perception, without any additional lighting, showing people, things, and actions that were actually supposed to remain invisible. As a tester for the film industry, Klopfenstein was experimenting with the limits of visibility.[11] This experimental quality remained firmly bound to the chemistry lab, not an uncommon occurrence in Basel, where Hans Richter

had already experimented with color films for the chemical industry back in the 1920s.

The Allgemeine Gewerbeschule (General Trade School) and its applied arts section, the Zeichen- und Malklasse (Drawing and Painting Department), where Klopfenstein had once been a student, was the most important workshop for *cinema povera* and *film brut* in Basel. Typography played a prominent role here in the 1960s, as is evident from Klopfenstein's early experiments and his fondness for the Umbria font up until the experimental films of the squatters in the 1980s, who carefully chose that lettering for their titles. It is the genealogy of Basel experimental film in the Allgemeine Gewerbeschule that explains this attention to light and color, a close proximity to chiaroscuro drawing, a fondness for blurriness and the effects of movement on the screen, and in general a concentration on the screen, on the image, and its visibility. The drawing and painting students were clearly less worried about the *hors-champ*, the offscreen, the imaginary vanishing lines of the field of vision.[12]

Among the Gewerbeschule painter-filmmakers, Werner von Mutzenbecher, a student in the painting department from 1957 to 1960, occupies a crucial position. He was already an established painter when he discovered, in Paris in 1968, cinematic forms that were poles apart from the cinema that he knew. This led him to experiment with 8mm and 16mm formats. Mutzenbecher's film *Rom* from 1979—he too was *fuori campo* in Italy at the time—is a study of seeing, shot on 8mm film, precisely at the juncture between the camera and the painter's eye. The film feeds on the curiosity with which eyes can scan things and facades in a tactile way, and it exercises a knowledge of draftsmanship with its baroque mathematical foreshortening and compression, vanishing lines, especially montage, and the techniques of the Soviet avant-garde applied to narrative, object-oriented relationships. Mutzenbecher essentially values strong forms with as much improvisation as possible. His works from a painter's studio, which soon encompassed the entire open city, differ from conventional filmmaking in terms of their isolation and a certain "I"-relatedness of their production. At the same time, they blazed a trail for others for a variety of further experiments.

For six years, from 1973 to 1979, Mutzenbecher gave a film class to drawing teachers every Saturday, which gradually brought Basel's *Filmfront* people together. It was intended as an elementary instruction along the lines of Josef Albers' concept of preliminary courses: space, time, movement, light, montage, material, and time-axis-manipulations were explored week after week in short, improvised projects. The impact of these courses can be seen and felt in the famous films of Basel's "angry young men" of the 1970s. In these films, slow is slow, and fast is fast, bright is bright, and darkness structures the images. People work within the frame, only the noises on the soundtrack come from elsewhere. If there is anything structural in these films, it is in their analysis of color and form; there are no nostalgic or emotional motives. A good example can be seen in the films of Ruedi Bind, the author of the *Filmfront*'s founding manifesto, who had summarized the fundamentals of the independent film under the title of "*Frühlingserwachen*, A. standort, B. blick-und bewegungsrichtung, C. die eingeworfenen fenster" (*Spring's awakening*: A. location, B. direction of view and movement, C. the broken windows). In Brechtian lowercase, it evokes a Marxist discourse. Point 14 reads: "rather than dependence on enormous outside capital for production, rather than dependence on dealers and producers for the distribution of works: direct contact and direct collaboration with film viewers, for their part, and at the same time contact, collaboration, union, associations, cooperatives with other filmmakers."[13] This in no way means aligning with others. Bind's film *Fenster A* (*Window A*, 1975) is an uncompromisingly strict composition of walls, windows, and views that first isolates them from the rest of the world and then, shot by shot, allows them to become images in their own right. In *Parallaxe* (1986), a film essay by Bernd Fiedler and Balz Raz, on which Mutzenbecher occasionally helped out as cameraman, the filmmakers worked with layers of images. For example, in one long shot of a bicycle leaning against a red brick wall, pedestrians pass by in the middle ground and traffic with cars and mopeds in the foreground, marking the screen like light and dark, thick and thin brushstrokes. These remain not so much as colors but as mental impressions, layering the image as in a painting. In a later shot in the film this is reflected by a

tin clown automaton that mechanically draws a portrait as if programmed, and thus translates three-dimensional realities back into the two-dimensional. This film essay is given a counterpoint in the form of entirely asynchronous sound montages, inversions of magnetic tape for the soundtrack, looped industrial sounds interrupted by the shrill, unpleasant ringing of an alarm clock, which is apparently intended to disturb the film's beautiful state between dream and reality. Thus, the impacts of the offscreen and *hors-champ* are indebted to the film's acoustic quality, and not to the structures of the image as screen.

Off-Beat: Rhythm

Raz, a former student of the Berlin Film Academy and a friend of Mutzenbecher from their common night shifts at the Basel post office, kept a record of his experiences in the form of cinematic diaries. As *Filmfront* confirms, his work followed the approach taken by Jonas Mekas, but was by no means aesthetically dependent on him. Mekas himself was present in the journal as a remedy, as an antidote to the mainstream: "Every break away from conventional, dead, official cinema is a healthy sign."[14] Another great cinematic diarist was Thomas Hungerbühler, also a student at the Kunstgewerbeschule, and a *Filmfront* man. Hungerbühler employed different formats in which he dovetailed private and political experiences, archivist and artist at the same time. Richard Bucher, in his diary of cities, chronicles the destruction of the city, Basel, which in his images casts off its old robe of the baroque and emerges into an unclear modernity. Here too, a passion for typography appears everywhere, if unintentionally, to give the films their own historic dimension, probably clearer in retrospect than at the time of production. It is not easy to explain where the humor in these films comes from and when precisely it is left out. For all the precision of its execution, it is Urs Breitenstein's *Tagesfilm* (*Day Film*, 1992) that shows a brilliant sense of humor: for instance, in the stop-motion sequences in which the routines of the residents and the mailman are demonstrations of the madness of automatism. Indeed, the filmmaker sees himself as one them. The cityscape itself, by contrast, seems as impassive as Buster Keaton's face.

Breitenstein, who had left Basel in 1978 to go to the Cooper Union School of Art and had participated in the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum in New York only to later attend the Städelschule, shot his *Zeil-Film* in Frankfurt am Main in 1980. It features another stylistic method that, in various forms, returns in the aesthetics to many experimental films of the Basel group: the pan. Breitenstein took his camera to the Zeil, Frankfurt's main shopping street, while this was under construction, letting it rotate faster and faster across a nearby construction site, with arrhythmic interruptions that seem like the hiccups of the man behind the camera, until the whole image dissolves into a study of the color planes of a 1980s architecture that was out of date before it even began to be built.

André Lehmann's films also clearly deserve a place among the great studies of cities and plazas. In *Westside Highway NY 77* (1977), *Manhattan 8 Standorte* (*Manhattan 8 Locations*, 1977), and his more recent film, *Ber-Lin 99/00* (2003), for example, manipulations of time lines are not merely arrangements of experiences of places and times, but compositions that establish new rhythms. Compared to work by other students at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Basel, Lehmann's films are like pieces by Thelonious Monk, which rely on intervals, pauses, and gaps, and thereby obtain their drive, speed, and intervals, from which no one can escape. The other extreme would probably be Klopfenstein's films, which are more akin to compositions by John Coltrane, and explore materiality qua sensitivity. Many filmmakers followed his lead here, in different ways. Another is the inventive Matthias Bosshart, whose studies of light and faces push the speed of 8mm film to its limits with light and candles. Bosshart also uses found film footage, which he duplicates and further manipulates revealing its own light rhythms. Werner von Mutzenbecher, too, works with similar rhythm-and-material studies when he copies 8mm films onto 16mm stock and reedits them. In other work, he employs Standard 8mm stock, which comes as 16mm film, but is cut down the middle axis in the lab after "double" exposure. Mutzenbecher leaves the 16mm strip as it is, uncut, projects it with a 16mm projector and, through this procedure, generates random correspondences between

the parallel 8mm fields (*4 × 8*, 1988). His films use various methods to turn light rhythms into space. In *Untergrund* (*Underground*) in 1985, for example, he steps into the projection beam and his silhouette becomes an avatar in the film's cinematic space. Mutzenbecher had, incidentally, studied philosophy with Karl Jaspers in Basel and, in his seminars, developed the idea of the leap that is necessary to get from thinking to faith, which, in cinematic terms, was conceived of as a jump into on-screen space. "Film was for me always half dream, half reality."[15] Doublings, condensations, folds, and blackouts reveal a Basel scenario that becomes visible only in the context of cinema.

Basel does not fit into any frame, even for people from Hamburg. It is barely Switzerland at all, but rather very much beyond German borders, French but not France; second-generation immigrants from the Balkans go to school here, having had first-hand experience of Germany's new wars. In the Canton of Basel there are 12 mosques, a reminder that our monotheistic culture is composed of three religions. Hardly anything in Europe is more European than Kleinbasel; Italian is spoken on the street; anyone who cares about their appearance goes to an Albanian hair stylist, and the neighborhood magazine, *Mosaic*, is published in four languages, now including English for the benefit of the expats of the pharma-industries. In 1977, filmmaker Urs Berger wrote in the first issue of *Filmfront*: "The Quartierfilmgruppe Kleinbasel [Kleinbasel Neighborhood Film Group] grew out of an initiative group that sought to build a neighborhood and cultural center on the site of the former of Kleinbasel barracks." In June 1977, the Quartierfilmgruppe shot a Super-8 film about evictions and squatting on the lower stretch of Rheinweg and on Florastrasse: "The basic idea behind our barracks project and our film work is this: if we want to entice the citizens or residents of the neighborhood out of their reserve, we must establish an alternative public sphere." People can be reached "on the street, in bars, when shopping. We could consider open-air screenings," and all political life "is important to our filmmaking."[16] Even in films about social movements, attention toward typography meets the eye: the essential aesthetic features for designing information in *Mir bsetze* (*We Squat*) of 1980 are typographic, albeit from

the arsenal of the punk flyer: 1. handwritten title on a red background; 2. white Letraset on blue background; 3. typewriting on white paper; 4. typewriting on a blue background.[17] Urs Berger, who had, among other projects, initiated the Quartierfilmgruppe Basel, operated the camera himself. On the one hand, the squatters were filmed with sympathy and, on the other, the police presence was also treated with quasi-ethnological interest. In "Über Experimentalfilme" (On Experimental Film) made in 1976, Werner von Mutzenbecher had written about the tradition of Alexandre Astruc and the *caméra-stylo*:

> anyone who has actually taken up a camera out of interest and pleasure in film, and perhaps also out of disgust with the entrenched position of commercial cinema, has taken a first step. They take their camera along, as once the painter or the traveler took a sketchbook, and use the miniature camera as if it were paper on which they quickly note things.[18]

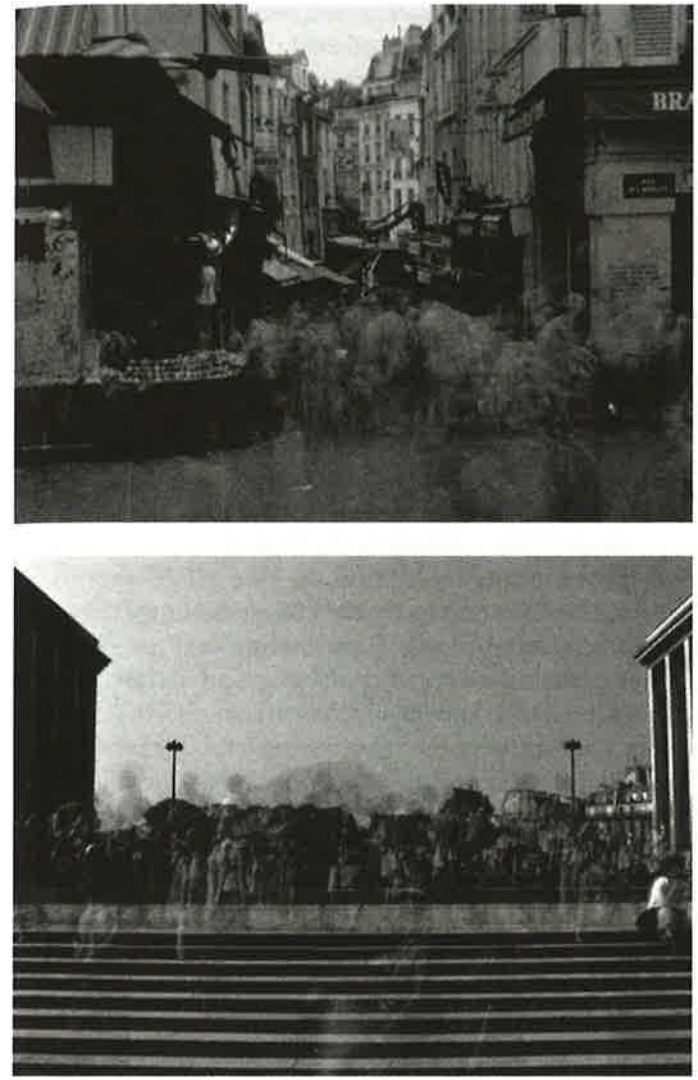
Mutzenbecher had, until recently, a studio in grounds of the former Kleinbasel barracks. Painters and filmmakers had been meeting on the parade ground since the 1980s. The gap between filmmakers, social movements, and art filmmakers was perhaps not so great in Kleinbasel as it has been elsewhere.

Not only in filming, but also in their writing, the experimental filmmakers of Basel formulated positions, and experimented with conceptual fields combining political and aesthetic positions. Whether as squatters, activists, theorists, as collectives or individual artists, they worked on relationships between the formal and conceptual in a spirit of critical inquiry: "In fact, every artwork, even the hermetic work, reaches beyond its monadological boundaries by its formal language. Each work, if it is to be experienced, requires thought, however rudimentary it may be."[19] For Urs Breitenstein and Lehmann of *Filmfront*, and for painter Marcel Stüssi, who unfortunately is no longer with us, these approaches marked the way out of the backroom of the bar where the filmmakers' group was founded, into contemporary galleries. It is precisely this growing success that makes the protagonists, who are still alive, point out

that they have not been a homogenous group, even if—or especially because?—the audience can recognize similarities in their oeuvre from the last 30 years.

Hors-Temps: Outside of Time

In the 1970s and 1980s, generally, generations of experimental filmmakers differed not so much in the forms they used, as in their preferred formats of Super-8 or video. Formats distinguished the different groups as did politics, aesthetics, and, indeed, distribution circuits. This was not the case in the context of independent film in Basel. As early as 1978, *Filmfront* had abandoned the purism of the powerful Super-8, and called on its readers to come to Bärenfelserstrasse, just around the corner from Bläsiring and Amerbach, to discuss the issues of video and its technical and financial aspects. These could scarcely be gauged insofar as future developments were unpredictable. Aesthetic questions were primary: "It seems more important to focus on subject matter than to worry about equipment at the moment."[20] In the same issue, ethnologist Béatrice Götz called on people to experiment with combining Super-8 and video devices and attempt to better coordinate experiments, "which the Algerians have been able to do for some time."[21] Everyone benefited from the broad network of connections in Basel. In January 1979, a program organized by the VUF was shown at the Solothurner Filmtage for the first time. *Filmfront* was triumphant: "Super-8 and video will be accepted as equals in the Solothurner Filmtage program."[22] Reinhard Manz, one of the founders of the Basel film movement, remained one of the most resilient bridges into the 1980s—a bridge toward video culture, and crossovers between art, film, and critical aesthetics. However, in his scornful *Vom Fortschritt* (*On Progress*), of 1991, he added his own sardonic commentary on film technology through various generations of video-material: what improvements have all these new features and colors managed to give us? He films himself entangled in cables while the video images become more and more feeble with every copy. Three years earlier, Manz had, in his very lovely 16mm Kodachrome film *Vie Centrale*, created several multiple exposures of street scenes in Paris, in the tradition of Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre's



Reinhard Manz, *Vie Centrale*, 1988 (Switzerland)
16mm Kodachrome film, 5 minutes 18 seconds

Boulevard du Temple, made precisely 150 years earlier, and set them each to a separate soundtrack. He revisited the contrast between volatile movements and the remanence of architecture and everything that does not move. The sensitivity of the film material enabled Manz to develop a sensorium for the past, to produce sensitivity to fleeting shadows, to reveal in the veils of exposure times a distance and foreignness of people, however close they were to the camera and how familiar they might be to us. Nearly 30 years later, the confusion of voices on the soundtrack, on which the voices of the people assert themselves against their ephemeral images, still preserves a dense memory of a lost city soundscape.

Pas de Hors-Scène: Nothing Obscene from Basel

Underground or experimental film—at least in the East or West Coast American context—always stimulates the gaze upon the visible body and the effects of its desire, and much of the success of the films of Stan Brakhage, Jack Smith, and Andy Warhol is due to their thematization of "sex, psyche, et cetera."[23] Yet, the early experimental film scene involving the young men of Basel remained surprisingly abstinent with regard to everything sexual, and followed the Protestant asceticism typical of the town. Klopfenstein, a man from Bern among the once-young men from Basel, is, so it seems, the only person who associated experiments with cinematic sensitivity to stories of obsession and love, albeit not as a Satanic ritual in the spirit of Kenneth Anger, but as a poetic fable. His *Ruf der Sibylla* (*Call of the Sibyl*) of 1984 is at once painting and cinema; it is about the knowledge of traditional drugs, but also about the impossibility of acting in movies insofar as film can always show the moment after the scene, what is off-stage, when the hero crashes into the backdrop. But even this off-screen is not ob-scene—on the contrary. Filmmaking in Basel, with its precise content, well-formulated artistic positions, politically rapid interventions, and very dry humor shows little interest in the excesses of the body or in moral transgression. No one talks about eroticism. The 90th minute or so of *Parallaxe* by Fiedler and Raz shows a pulsing carotid artery, curves of naked bodies, and then a close-up of a woman's bare

breast with goose bumps. But as soon as the audience gets ready to hold its breath, a brown briefcase falls onto an armchair. Basel remains sober and busy. Certainly, the framing in Lehmann's *Manhattan* can be described as highly erotic. The transitions between the world above and the world below in his brilliantly chosen details of subway entrances and 42nd Street presumably convey more of a combination of violence and desire than all of Mutzenbecher's *Orpheus* films. As far as mad passion among the *Filmfront* filmmakers is concerned, however, we have to wait for the works by the Dellers brothers in the 1990s. The formal dominates in *Filmfront*; its very name refers to Bloch but not to his complex knowledge of and about relationships. It is therefore hardly surprising that artist-curator Simon Lamunière writes in retrospect: "Although the art scene in Basel at the time was interesting, it seemed somewhat ossified to me. Even the city's museums were not quite up-to-date."[24] The bold men of *Filmfront* would certainly shout out with Brakhage: "Make place for the artist. Do it now. For you, as well as for him, tomorrow is too late!"[25] But they lacked the second part, the ecstatic element that Brakhage, as a young man in 1955, boasted of resolutely: "I am young and I believe in magic. I am learning how to cast spells. My profession is transforming."[26]

In Basel, the transformative, eccentric, and humorous remained a matter of later queens and their videos with a clipped off-screen. No more referring to the space and time beyond the frame. Instead they did the right thing and exposed themselves. Should one appeal to Adorno here?

> No artist knows with certainty whether anything will come of what he does, his happiness and anxiety, which are totally foreign to the contemporary self-understanding of science, subjectively registers something objective: the vulnerability of all art.[27]

The exposure of women artists challenges art. That is true for the Basel video group, too. Knees, teeth, breasts, the body rendered with skin, bones, and spit between the toes, are on the screen. They refuse to be moved off the scene, literally, into the ob-scene. These films keep the message "on." In the three-channel installation, *Was ist mit Deinem*

Haar? (*What's Up with Your Hair?* 1994), by Muda Mathis, the camera once again rotates with centrifugal force, so that a spinning head speaks to us as Duchamp's anemic cinema once did. "I'm glad," says the spiraling woman's mouth in the twisted woman's face, "that you have such short arms and can't reach very far." Certainly not into the *hors-champ*. In experimental film, especially in Basel, the *hors-champ* remains negotiable.

[1] See Benjamin Wihstutz, "Introduction," Erika Fischer-Lichte, Benjamin Wihstutz (eds.), *Performance and the Politics of Space: Theatre and Topology*, Routledge, New York 2013, p. 1–12.
[2] See *Filmfront*, no. 1 (1978), n. p. The complete series of *Filmfront* can be accessed at blog.zhdk.ch/sfex.
[3] Christian Meyer, "Adam: Meine Art zu sehen," *Filmfront*, no. 1 (1978), n. p.
[4] Stan Brakhage, "Metaphors on Vision," Bruce McPherson (ed.), in Stan Brakhage, *Essential Brakhage: Selected Writings on Filmmaking*, Documentext, New York 2001, p. 11–71, esp. p. 12.
[5] See Julia Zutavern, *Politik des Bewegungsfilm*, Schüren, Marburg 2015; Urs Berger, Ruedi Bind, Julia Zutavern (eds.), *Filmfrontal*, Reinhardt, Basel 2010; Irene Schubiger (ed.), *Schweizer Videokunst der 1970 und 1980er Jahre. Eine Rekonstruktion*, JRP|Ringier, Zurich 2009.
[6] See Irene Schubiger, *Schweizer Videokunst*, p. 161.
[7] Les Reines Prochaines were founded in 1987 and are an all-female Swiss music band and performance group. Pipilotti Rist was a member from 1988 to 1994. Their lyrical songs draw on many different genres and traditions.
[8] André Bazin, "Painting and Cinema," *What Is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray, vol. 1, University of California Press, Berkeley 2005, p. 164–169, esp. p. 166.
[9] In English, the French term "hors-champ" can be translated as "offscreen" or "out of frame." However, here the author alludes to the theory of "hors-champ" as developed by André Bazin and later critics writing for the *Cahiers du Cinéma* [editor's note].
[10] Jacques Aumont et al., *Aesthetics of Film*, trans. Richard Neupert, University of Texas Press, Austin 1992, p. 13.
[11] See Clemens Klopfenstein in conversation with Thomas Schärer and Fred Truniger, January 8, 2012.
[12] See *Blast of Silence* (1973–1974); *Der Tag isch vergange* (*The Day Is Over*, 1975); the photo series *paese sera* (1974), *Roma notte 74* (1974), *Umbria notte 75* (1975); and the chapter by Simon Koenig in this volume.
[13] *Filmfront*, no. 1 (1978), p. 4.
[14] See *Filmfront*, no. 6 (1979), p. 4. Conversation with the author in Mutzenbecher's studio, July 14, 2016.
[15] Studio conversation, July 14, 2016.
[16] *Filmfront*, no. 1 (1978).
[17] See *Filmfront*, no. 8 (1980), p. 43.
[18] Werner von Mutzenbecher, "Über Experimentalfilm (1976)," *Filmfront*, no. 6 (1979), p. 15–17, esp. 17, reprinted in Sabine Schaschl-Cooper, Isabel Zürcher (eds.), *Werner von Mutzenbecher – Im Film sein*, exh. cat., Kunsthaus Basel Land/Modo, Freiburg im Breisgau 2006, p. 75–76.
[19] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1997, p. 462.
[20] *Filmfront*, no. 3 (1978), p. 29.
[21] *Filmfront*, no. 1 (1978), p. 21.
[22] *Filmfront*, no. 5 (1979), p. 7.
[23] See Parker Tyler, *Sex, Psyche Etcetera in the Film*, Horizon, London 1971; *Underground Film: A Critical History*, Da Capo, New York 1995.
[24] Simon Lamunière, "Erlebnis, Leidenschaft, Freundschaft," Reinhard Manz, René Pulfer (eds.), *Video Rewind: Videowochen im Wenkenpark, 1984/1986/1988*, Merian, Basel 2013, p. 66–69, esp. p. 68.
[25] Stan Brakhage, "Make Place for the artist," *Essential Brakhage*, p. 74–76, esp. p. 74.
[26] *Ibid.*
[27] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 353–354

Filmfront, no. 3, 1978, p. 6