

# FORMATE DES WIR

Saturday,  
14th December 2013,  
8 pm

"Editing the Collective"

Guests: Dan Kidner

Venue: Archive Kabinett,  
Dieffenbachstr. 31,  
10967 Berlin

## Intro

The sixth evening in the series of *Formate des WIR* was titled *Editing the Collective*. We discussed questions of historical collective and political practices from the perspective of current curatorial and artistic research methods. Over the course of the previous events and edited transcripts of *Formate des WIR* it became apparent to us that we were writing a history of the projects that we were re-visiting. The difficulties in doing this emerged as we proceeded. For this sixth and last evening we proposed a project from outside of Berlin – namely the book *Working Together: Notes on British Film Collectives in the 1970s* (ed. Petra Bauer and Dan Kidner, 2013) – so as to reflect back upon our processes. The book has four sections: Introductions, Essays, Conversations (with film makers and theorists: Ann Guedes, Humphry Trevelyan, Steve Sprung, and Peter Osborne and Paul Willemen), and a final section, Archive: Texts 1970–1982 (which features re-printed texts from film journals like *Screen* and *Afterimage*, and re-produced pamphlets, promotional material, and statements from the various film collectives from this era).

We invited Dan Kidner (London-based curator and writer) to introduce the book, which we then discussed with an audience. This was held at the bookshop-publisher Archive Kabinett/Books, Berlin, which has for years provided a forum for an international discourse on contemporary publishing strategies. During the evening, excerpts from the book were read aloud by one member of the audience: these excerpts were from statements of intent originally publicised

by the film collectives, London Women's Film Group, Berwick Street Film Collective, and Cinema Action.

## First part

Dan introduces the book and shows a sequence from the film *Nightcleaners*.<sup>1</sup>

a moment when political filmmaking changed. For instance with The Black Audio Film Collective – who started in the eighties and whose films look very different to *Nightcleaners* – one can still see the influence: their political films are a reflection on their own position. They are about mourning the end of the possibility for successful



#0:39:45.0# Dan Kidner: The film is over ninety minutes long. In this sequence we hear the union member talking to the cleaners. We see different groups of people that are trying to help each other or are trying to work together, but they do not fully connect with one another: the women's movement, the cleaners, and representatives from different unions. Formally the film is layered in a very interesting way, the sound drops in and out throughout, and between sequences there are black spaces, which halt the narrative. *Nightcleaners* marked

campaign strategies.

#0:43:35.3# Audience: In how far could the collectives be described as political?

#0:44:04.1# DK: Why would you form a collective to make a film that wasn't political? There were no collectives that did not make political films. Although it is a point of contention whether there were collectives, or collaborations. Therefore part of the reason why we began our project was to tease out the distinction between cooperatives and collectives.

0#:45:12.4# Audience: What is your distinction?

#0:45:15.0# DK: Cooperatives do something quite different, they gather, to make something available to a wider group of people, that benefits the group while also offering the opportunity for others to join in. Groups that called themselves collectives made films together, rather than simply share resources and facilities. In one of the texts in the book there is a conversation between philosopher, Peter Osborne<sup>2</sup> and film theorist, Paul Willemsen.<sup>3</sup> Their discussion hinges on the idea that true collectives are works of fiction. They can only exist as a model of collectivity, an image of collectivity. The only reason we refer to these groups in the book as collectives is because that's what they called themselves.

#0:48:27.2# Achim Lengerer: The London Film Maker Cooperative, which later became LUX, always seemed to me a group of filmmakers who were less political. Was not the cooperative basically formed in order to distribute their films?

#0:49:15.5# DK: Yes, the London filmmakers modelled their cooperative after the New York Film-Makers' Coop. Anyone could become a member and benefit from the Coop, which had technical facilities. You could go there and make your films, and your films could then be available for distribution. Were there any similar cooperative models in Berlin around that time?

#0:49:50.7# AL: Maybe the Arsenal?

#0:49:51.8# Florian Wüst (editor's note: Berlin-based artist and film curator): The history of Arsenal is completely different – the idea was to show films that were not usually screened in Berlin, and they would distribute films only later on.

#0:49:55.8# AL: On the cover of your book self-descriptions by all the three film collectives are reprinted: London Women's Film Group, Berwick Street Film Collective, and Cinema Action. They all pick up on the word collective. It might be helpful to read their definitions aloud.

#0:52:08.4# Audience member (reading from front page of

Working Together):

The London Women's Film Group was formed in January 1972 in response to a notice in the Women's Liberation Newsletter and a showing of films dealing with Women's Liberation issues organised by the Belsize Lane Women's Liberation Group/Liberation Films.

The group was initially formed for two basic reasons; to disseminate Women's Liberation ideas, and for women to learn the skills denied them in the industry. The film industry is excessively male-dominated and this is reflected on the screen in terms of portrayal of women and choice of subject matter. For this to change it was obviously essential that women acquire the necessary skills and experience (to make films).

The Berwick Street Film Collective was formed in the Spring of 1971. Its aims are:

- 1.) To produce films that take politics as their subject both in terms of filmmaking and film content, i.e. to examine what constitutes the experience of politics, both on practical and theoretical levels. This entails an examination of the processes of perception which in turn requires a re-examination of film language - photography, montage, sound etc.
- 2.) To work with other independent groups and individuals to set up an independent production and distribution system and thus slowly relieve our screens from mourning.
- 3.) To participate in the development of authentic revolutionary culture, by re-examining our traditions whilst at the same time producing work which results from their critical re-evaluation. To be ready to confront various socialist organisations for their lack of interest in ideological struggle.
- 4.) To help people in the Collective to develop individual work as well as, hopefully, a collective practice.
- 5.) To survive.

Cinema Action was founded seven years ago as a collective for film production, mobile cinema, distribution and to provide a film workshop. Film production and the facilities and services provided by Cinema Action involve the participation of the community or working group who choose film to identify themselves, their lives and

their problems as a means of developing awareness and support within the whole community.

The production of these 'peoples films' is part of a discussion process in which all the elements, ideas and the dramatic composition of a particular project are decided according to the needs and wishes of the community. The people decide for themselves the form and content of the film and participate actively in its making both through discussion of the issues involved and by using Cinema Action's equipment and workshop.

#0:56:40.6# DK: Berwick Street Film Collective grew out of Cinema Action. There was a disagreement about what a political film should be, so basically BSFC broke away from CA and then made *Nightcleaners*. Although *Nightcleaners* did start as a campaign film, it became clear in their early discussions that it was never going to be a straight campaign film. I don't think anybody thought it was going to be quite as formally radical as it turned out to be. However, The London's Women's Film Group formed with a concrete aim: to seize the means of production for women filmmakers.

#0:57:47.0# Miya Yoshida: What I find interesting in the London's Women's Film Group is how they accumulated knowledge. They write, "Every individual worked on the film production, participated in all levels. During the making of *The Amazing Equal Party Show* in 1974, the members in the group rotated position, which means during the shooting of the film each member of the staff had a chance to operate the camera, sound and lights." This indicates that the collective was a space not only for representing their rights, but also for self-education. Do you see similar examples in other collectives?

#0:59:02.0# DK: In terms of what distinguished the LWFG from the other collectives, it is that they were very keen to show that they were "unprofessional". They were quite militant about this. Even if you were not good at recording sound, you had to do it. Accordingly, the viewer might not understand the dialogue in parts of the film because of the poor quality of the recording. They didn't want to hide their

lack of professional training. By leaving the traces of this on screen the nature of their mode of production would become politically more legible.

#1:01:01.4# MY: What about your collaboration with Petra Bauer? Today international collaboration between individuals is more frequent, due to the mobility created by residency programs – which was the case with Petra being artist in residence at Southend-on-Sea. Collaboration originating in these circumstances is fundamentally different from the ones in the seventies that we are discussing here. How did you start working with Petra?

#1:01:15.9# DK: The interesting thing about our collaboration was that Petra and I didn't necessarily agree on anything in the beginning. But we decided to make this productive, that is, we tried not to iron out those disagreements, but to work with them in a way. Our different positions were almost the engine for our project. Petra, as a visual artist from Sweden, had a very specific reason for wanting to learn and understand about the history of documentary filmmaking and political collectives. I am a curator, producer and a writer.

#1:04:39.8# Audience: Working with these disagreements reminds me of the attitude of the London Women's Film Group: to show their unprofessionalism and short-comings to enforce their collective practice.

#1:05:52.8# DK: That is precisely what inspired us while we were working on the book. But still I am skeptical as to whether this represents any kind of collectivity, but there's a lot to admire in the positions that were taken by these filmmakers.

Second part

#00:00:32-8# Annette Maechtel: Coming back to the production of the book, when you interviewed a collective for the book, was each member of the collective present at the time?

#00:00:34-4# DK: No, we interviewed each member individually, and these interviews are ruthlessly edited and the book is ruthlessly edited as well. We conducted over twenty inter-

views and edited them down to two pages, out of which only three were in the book.

#00:00:39-9# AM: Did you have to interview them individually, simply because they don't exist as collectives anymore?

#00:00:39-9# DK: They don't exist as functioning groups, but it was more a practical thing, because they were either in different countries or were not in touch with one another anymore.

#00:00:58-4# AL: As I understand it, some of these interviews were also conducted in public.

#00:01:26-9# DK: Only the conversation that took place between Paul Willemen and Peter Osborne took place in public, and was transcribed afterwards, but I would not call this an interview. However, I did one, a very short, 10 minute interview with Steve Sprung, a member of Cinema Action, just before a screening of one of his films. This was public. But it wasn't transcribed and I would not publish it either.

#00:02:16-7# AL: One more question about editing. The collectives were doing a filmic montage, editing their filmic materials and now you have been editing a book about their work. In your introduction you describe different steps of the production process for making the book, e.g. Petra Bauer's exhibition *Me, You, Us, Them* at Focal Point Gallery in 2010. Together with her, you also re-staged a lecture in a performative manner. There is something quite unusual happening here. It is not only the person who takes on the role of the artist, Petra, who is artistically involved with the material, but also you as the "curator" of the project. Could you expand on this a little?

#00:04:062# DK In the four years Petra and I did projects together; exhibitions, screenings, events and this book. We also did one performance together. We were invited to show some films and give a talk at a conference in Rotterdam organized by Utrecht University and the Erasmus University Rotterdam, called *Waiting for the Political Moment*. And this was one of those conferences where you have philosophers and academics giving papers, and

then in a different venue you would have a cultural strand where people show films, or do performances. We were invited to do something in the cultural strand, and Petra and I asked them if we could deliver a paper instead, a paper that we had written together, but we hadn't. It was a paper that Paul Willemen and Claire Johnston had written and read in 1976 at the end of a film festival. The reason we wanted to insert this gesture within this sort of academic arena, was to see what it would be like with this politicised language from the 1970s coming out of our mouths today. We practised it as a performance. Once we finished delivering the paper to the conference, we announced that we hadn't written it. There was a very interesting reaction. Half of the people were outraged that we had committed this act of vandalism and the other half were, I think, really intrigued. There was a discussion about political language afterwards, which was what we had hoped for. Something that you may read from this era can become laugh-out-loud funny, because of the earnestness and the commitment, especially the insistence on the importance of the medium of film. For a lot of these collectives, doing film was doing politics, they were completely synonymous – which might have some relevance today.

#00:07:45-1# AL: Yes, an important factor for the film collectives was to not only distribute the work, but to screen it and discuss it with the audience. They intended that a screening enabled a political discussion to happen and to make intellectual political tools available to the public. This idea of a gathered audience during the 60s/70s/80s period of cinema has maybe disappeared in our digital era today.

#00:09:31-4# DK: They believed that there was an equivalent between the space of projection and the space of the political meeting – one could turn into the other. But it's very hard to find an account of where that has actually worked effectively. We asked the members of the collectives and got mixed responses. They would show the works in very different contexts, on shop floors, to workers, to schools the next day, to a film club and to a women's group the

next week.

#00:10:20-9# Audience: It happened in Germany as well. Especially in Hamburg and Bremerhafen, because of the shipbuilding industry. Cinema Action had a very close connection with Zentralfilm in Hamburg and Die Arbeiterkammer in Bremen. Die Arbeiterkammer was linked to universities, but also to trade unions and they had their own film making unit. In the mid 70s I taught at the university in Bremen and I invited Cinema Action for a weekend seminar where we (amongst other films) screened *Nightcleaners*. What I noticed is that Cinema Action had very long political discussions, but they did not discuss questions of film editing or filmic techniques. One member of Cinema Action was German, too. He came over several times to Zentralfilm in Hamburg, where they had a German print of the *Shipbuilders*. It also comes to my mind that Klaus Wildenhahn with *Emdenfilm* is arguably in the line of creating collective film material within a working class context (editor's note: *Emden geht nach USA, 1975/76. A four part documentary about the closing of the Volkswagen production plant in Emden*).

#00:14:33-8# AL: Are there any remarks or questions?

#00:14:33-8# Audience: How long did the British collectives you write about last?

#00:14:45-3# DK: Berwick Street Film Collective from about '72 to '78. Their only film made as a functioning group was *Nightcleaners* (1975) - *Ireland Behind the Wire* (1974) and '36 to '77 (1978) were made by members of the group and were occasionally screened under the auspices of the group. The London Women's Film Group lasted as a coherent group for only two or three years. Cinema Action started around 1960. Their first film was in '69. They never really disbanded properly, so they are technically still going, but their last film was, I think, made in 1989. But their cinematic style changed completely over the years. They made feature films in the '80s. One is an amazing documentary-cum-fiction film called *So That You Can Live* in 1982. However, there is a collective called Amber, who started at the end of the 1960s, and is still making

films.

#00:16:57-2# Tobias Hering (editor's note: *Berlin-based film curator and writer*): Amber made a quite interesting film with DEFA, the East German state film production company. It is called *From Marx & Engels to Marks & Spencer*. (Audience laughing) It is a comparison between the shipbuilding industries in Rostock and Newcastle, made in '87 or '88 just before the collapse of East Germany as a state. The two parts, the one that Amber filmed in Rostock and the other that DEFA filmed in Newcastle are strikingly different. Newcastle at this time was at the end of Thatcherism with unemployment at thirty percent, while in Rostock there was a thriving ship industry and workers had full rights. It is an incredible film made by two important documentary filmmakers of DEFA, Winfried & Barbara Junge, and is really worth seeing.

#00:18:45-2# DK: What's the title again?

#00:18:56-2# TH: *From Marx & Engels to Marks & Spencer*.

(Audience laughing)

#00:19:03-8# DK: It's worth it just for the title!

#00:19:03-8# TH: As you suggest, the films that function as pure "campaign" films seem to have less artistic quality than those produced over a longer length of time.

#00:20:12-0# DK: Films that reflect upon the campaign they emerged from are probably more interesting artistically. Some of the earlier Cinema Action films that were tied to specific campaigns that came out before the campaigns ended, have varying aesthetics, and formally are very interesting as well. But I think *Nightcleaners* and Cinema Action's *So That You Can Live* do something so different to the campaign films - and I have to be careful how I put this - that it's maybe possible to read them within a wider canon of experimental filmmaking.

1) *Nightcleaners* (1975) is a documentary film made by the Berwick Street Film Collective (Marc Karlin, Mary Kelly, James Scott and Humphry Trevelyan) about the campaign to unionize the underpaid women who cleaned office blocks at night. Intending at the outset to make a campaign film, the Collective turned to new forms in order to represent the forces at work between the cleaners and the unions, and the complex nature of the campaign itself. The result was an intensely self-reflexive film, which implicated both the filmmakers and the audience in the processes of precarious, invisible labour. It is increasingly recognised (to current political art practice) as a key work of the 1970s both in subject matter and form.

2) Peter Osborne (born 1958) is Professor of Modern European Philosophy and Director of the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP), Kingston University, London. He is also an editor of the British journal *Radical Philosophy*. He made an analysis on the transformation of the ontology of the work of art in Conceptual Art and post Conceptual Art. Osborne's books on Art Theory and Aesthetics include: *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (1995/2010), *Conceptual Art* (2002), *How to read Marx* (2005) and *Anywhere Or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (2013).

3) Paul Willemen (1944-2012) was a film theorist and Research Professor at the Centre for Media Research at the University of Ulster at Coleraine. He played a key role in the British Film Institute in the 1970s and 1980s, helping define the subject area in the UK. He also promoted an understanding of alternative cinema in all its formal and political diversity, and shaped the concept of comparative film studies by proposing the notion of "Third Cinema".

Image caption:

Still from *Nightcleaners*, Berwick Street Film Collective (1975).