PART II

The Sexual (In)Sight

4

Art/Obscenity/Underground Cinema in West Germany, 1968–1972: Circulating through the Debates

Megan Hoetger

In 1969 West German film programmer Karlheinz Hein, together with Austrian artist-filmmakers VALIE EXPORT and Peter Weibel, organized a multimedia, multisensory "altered state" event that toured West Germany (FRG) and German-speaking Switzerland. Reminiscent of Andy Warhol and the Velvet Underground's *The Exploding Plastic Inevitable* (1966–7), "Underground Explosion" featured experimentation across theater, music, film, and visual art performance. It moved to at least five different sites—Essen, Cologne, Munich, Stuttgart, and Zürich—where it took over local stadiums and circus halls, bringing together thousands of youths who had gathered in revolt. This inclination toward rebellion among West German youth was multipronged. It was a student revolt against an educational infrastructure in which former members of the National Socialist Party held many of the most influential positions. It was a sexual revolt against the repressive norms of a state anxious to distance itself from the lasciviousness of the Nazi period. It was a philosophical revolt taken up under the influence of Theodor Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (1966) and his students in Frankfurt. It was a revolt in music by way of an embrace of US traditions of jazz and rock 'n' roll, and a nascent German experimental sound scene—"from [Jimi] Hendrix to [Karlheinz] Stockhausen." Finally, it was an "inter-technological" revolt against the separation of media communication systems.[1] For Peter Weibel, "Underground Explosion" was a moment to look directly in the face (or faces) of a failed culture and speak—or scream—back to it. To document these "revolts," Hein invited Austrian experimental filmmaker Kurt Kren to join the tour and film the activities. Of the more than eight hours of footage Kren collected, what remains is a five-and-a-half-minute, out-of-focus film called *23/69 Underground Explosion*. It is a mescaline-induced haze of motion, an action in itself. Kren's off-kilter camera work is intensified by the discordant soundscape of experimental jazz phrases, vocal tracks from Motown classics, rock guitar riffs, and electronic feedback noise. These audio elements drift in and out, sometimes syncing with the movement of bodies, but more often not.

In *23/69* we see a stage filled with a discordant scape of Happening-like actions ranging from theater warm-up trust falls to bodies climbing over one another (à la Simone Forti's 1961 *Huddle*) and writhing on the floor (à la Carolee Schneemann's 1964 *Meat Joy*). In the flash of film projector light, traditional stage spotlighting is replaced by a radiating red and blue glow, and the scant visual information that is initially recognizable blurs out as the jazz phrasing performed on stage picks up speed (Plate 7). Figures and instruments begin to dissolve into streaks of red, blue, and yellow light traversing a smoky black ground like acid shadows. They pulsate with halos, afterimages, and visual snow—like the effects brought on by 3,4,5-trimethoxyphenethylamin (mescaline) and lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD)—hovering in the perceptual field. And then the film sequence breaks. Things go silent and dark.

The intensity of the "Underground Explosion" environment holds in it both the exhilaration of discovery and the panic of overstimulation involved in the hallucinogenic experience. One could perhaps dismiss the event as "trippy" but for the ways that Kren's camera jarringly jerks us around. Dizzying in-camera edits make clear that the generative potential of psychedelia is also the stuff of which bad trips are made. In this drug-induced, sexualized, and theretofore forbidden space, our view continuously shifts from the stadium seating through which the camera point of view weaves, to the stage and its activities—projection screens, clusters of sound equipment, and chaotically moving bodies—to the reflective surfaces and flashing bulbs of the media photographers' cameras, which flicker as the gathered journalists attempt to capture what is going on. Roving between these sites, Kren's "document" triangulates spaces—the audience arena, the stage/screen, and the photographers' press box. The out-of-focus perspective through which he visually and sonically represents these constitutive elements of cinema (spectator, screen, discursive circulation) mimics the blurred and blurry ideological effects of the part political, part psychedelic performance media concert—an event that distorts and distends the lines between elements of the cinematic apparatus, and pushes up against the decency standards that organized and ordered life in the FRG. It is this configuration of spaces, as well as the vertiginous way in which Kren configured them, that suggest the organizing principles for this essay. Thinking through this model of formation—of realignment and nonalignment—of image, viewer, and context, the following pages examine what I call the "critical-political" project of underground cinema screening events like "Underground Explosion" during the final years of the FRG's porn panic. The entanglements discussed here—of the art market, New Left activist causes, and obscenity debates—prompt a set of questions on "good politics." Operating through a set of negations that began with the "not fascist" and building a complex, praxis-based negative critique from there, "Underground Explosions" forcefully posed the question: "What is left?" (as in "What remains?" and "What is Left?").

The West German Porn Panic and the Film Screening Event

In the 1960s political turbulence and social upheaval manifested in West Germany and elsewhere through debates around pornography and obscenity laws. In US-Western European contexts the sexual revolution coincided with student and workers' movements and anti-colonial solidarity struggles. This so-called revolution loosely constituted a social movement that challenged traditional Judeo-Christian codes of behavior related to sexuality and libidinal expression and that influenced a generation of youths eager to shed the repressive

mores of their parents' wartime generation and establish their own autonomous identities. Images abounded of men and women piled into beds together, topless women, and women burning their bras. Such activity prompted anxiety and debate at the individual-familial and state levels, crisscrossing electoral and activist positions associated with the Left, as well as the moral decency standards held by those on both the left and the right. This porn panic spanned party platforms, taking different guises as it crossed policy positions.[2]

The situation was particularly fraught in the FRG, where issues relating to sex, sexuality, and the consumption of their representations were entangled with the country's efforts to re-form its national identity after the multiple wreckages of its past—from the rapid industrialization of the Wilhelmian period and the traumas of World War I to the experimentation and failure of the interwar Weimar Republic and the horrors of the *Nazizeit*. This "new" national identity was, moreover, negotiated in direct relation to its other, East Germany (GDR)— another point of anxiety. From the Reconstruction period through the early Cold War years (the 1950s to the mid-1960s), both Germanys were actively building and rebuilding their identities through double negations: in the FRG identity was being figured against the ground of "not fascism" and "not communism" and in the GDR of "not fascism" and "not capitalism."[3] The new West German state system propagated itself on a freedom of "choice" that was carefully linked to the ability of the liberal democratic nation-state to provide the best (or, at least, better than state socialism) for its citizens. Numerous aspects of society, from sexual relations and familial structures to communication technologies, media access, and urban planning, were carefully reorganized around a rhetoric of democratic choice that consumerism was to offer.

The threat of the "obscene" in this context exceeded the formal boundaries of what was described as hardcore pornography, which depends on the making visible of the penetrative sex act and the dénouement of orgasm.[4] Instead obscenity—those activities prohibited by the vague language of §184 in the FRG's Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*)—encompassed a range of actions and behaviors. The "indecency" of the pornographic read as *obscenity* stretched from explicit explorations of sexuality (especially homosexual pleasure) to overt representations of race and racial otherness.[5] Such material, which populated screen and stage in *23/69 Underground Explosion*, threatened to both feminize (or "soften") and radicalize (or "harden") youth cultures. On one hand, the refusal of the state's normative body politic— from the organization of theater seating that kept bodies separate (*not* touching) to the prohibition against depictions of bodily erotics on screen—was a feminization of bodies. Both on- and off-screen there were risks of sensuousness and permeability. Sometimes it was drug-induced, as had been the case in Kren's mescaline-induced *23/69*, and sometimes not. This feminization led, on the other hand, to a radicalization of bodies involved in this sensuous experience. Exposure to that way of being, it was feared, would harden anti-institutional resolve and refusal to willingly perform subjecthood within the boundaries of normative national identity. The danger seemed clear: with so many people packed into a space with no recognizable organization or order, anything could happen.

Events like "Underground Explosion" posed a significant threat, not only because of the sounds and movements imaged on screen and activated in spaces—though this was the impetus for police raids and legal battles. It was also a result of the underground and ad hoc means by which such screening events came together—often temporary alliances with both the public (state) and private (commercial) spheres—and circumvented the predetermined field of choice mapped out by the state's liberal consumerist program. In the midst of broader Cold War debates regarding cultural policy in the FRG, experimental filmmakers and programmers like Hein, Weibel, and EXPORT formed alternative distribution structures for the circulation of their films, many of which had little in the way of art-institutional or

film-industrial support. This tactic of circumvention was bolstered by the emergence of a sprawling filmmaker cooperative network that bypassed the nation-state as framework for distribution, including its rhetoric of democratic, consumerist choice. The push for expanding infrastructural supports beyond commercial circuits for art and film was also, in West Germany and elsewhere, a fight for the legality of events that included noncommercial materials and actions, which rubbed against morality codes and decency laws. The history of this battle's unfolding, however, has thus far largely been described through aesthetic choices.

At stake has been a claiming of the "proper" aesthetic strategy for film's political intervention. Should it be narrative? Should it not? What is the function of entertainment in political intervention? What is the function of pleasure? This "right to claim" a correct politic was being contested in US and British film circles on a battleground broadly exemplified in the division between New York-based film theorist Annette Michelson and California-based film critic Gene Youngblood. The question of medium specificity surfaced—what made film "Film" for Michelson was its capacity to tell stories, and, potentially, to tell stories differently. Youngblood, conversely, hedged his bets on another dimension of the moving image's entertainment value: its potential status as spectacular event. Film events offered a fundamentally different ideological vision of what "radical" change even meant. In West Germany this situation extended into state funding structures. Following the 1962 Oberhausen Manifesto and new industry standards, which codified the feature-length art house narrative form, a third opposition party began to develop that was neither commercial nor art house.[6] It was art film. *What was that? Where did you show it? How had the spectatorial experience become so rigidified that a four-minute film was mostly inconceivable?* Underneath and alongside battles over narrativity, a larger war was being waged in the FRG over funding structures, the organization of film's economies and market motions, and, most fundamentally, the modes of social relation that "cinema" *could* and *should* foster. Accordingly, the central focus across experimental film and performance events was finding viable market structures. The cooperative model thus emerged.

Following a landmark 1967 International Experimental Film Festival known as EXPRMNTL in Belgium, the cooperative movement, which had until then only been active in the United States and Britain, took hold across continental Europe. EXPRMNTL brought together an international group of filmmakers interested in establishing a circulation network for their work and that of other filmmakers in their regions. Cooperatives that began to crop up were invested not in building national identity but in creating collective group identity. Attempts to form a European Filmmakers Cooperative followed the 1967 convening. Though this never came to fruition, it precipitated the establishment of robust networks of communication among local settings from Amsterdam to Rome. Each cooperative took on particular characteristics in response to specificities of context. While the Hamburg Co-op in the northern West German port city primarily consisted of filmmakers connected to the commercial scene, the Austria Filmmakers Co-op (AFMC) in Vienna invested its efforts in demonstrations against what co-op members saw as fascist elements in state arts institutions and the market capitulations of a liberal "democratizing" order (Figure 4.1). In early 1969 such differences led to a protest of the Hamburger Filmschau, a festival co-organized by the co-op there, by members of the AFMC, as well as those of the Cologne-based XSCREEN project.[7] Unwieldy as these systems and events were—consider the triangulation of audience arena, stage/screen, and press apparatus Kren's film had dizzyingly captured—they were crucial to creating alternative distribution conditions and providing different conduits for movement alongside and in between the rigidified mechanisms of prevailing state-promoted market structures and dominant activist circuits.

FIGURE 4.1 Photographer unknown, "Anti-festival" organizers at the Hamburger Filmschau. *Bild*, March 8, 1969. Reprinted in *W+B Hein: Dokumente 1967–1985: Fotos, Briefe, Texte*, 1985.

"Programs and Not Programmatic Agendas"

Cooperatives may have established new and different industry standards for distribution, but shifts in exhibition and access were shared between the cooperatives proper and other projects, like the "Underground Explosion." The traveling multimedia event documented in Kren's *23/69* was the second underground explosion to take place in German-speaking Western Europe at the end of the 1960s. The other was a screening program organized in Cologne one year earlier, in 1968. The traveling event captured in *23/69* was named and conceived in homage to this earlier program. Though they both had the title Underground Explosion and dramatically shifted audience and screen/stage relations, the 1968 event had a much more complicated relationship to publicity. It was not an independently staged spectacle selling sex and leftist identification as the concert in 1969 would be. Instead, it was a satellite program to the annual Art Cologne (*Köln Kunstmarkt*) organized by the XSCREEN Cologne Studio for Independent Film (*XSCREEN Kölner Studio für unabhängigen Film*), a cultural association established in Cologne in 1968 by a group of thirteen critics, artists, and filmmakers with the mission of creating more opportunity and access to noncommercial and independent (*unabhängigen*) film.[8] Like the co-op movement, XSCREEN was an outgrowth of the momentum amassed in Knokke.

Through collaborative effort, the group sought to open up a space that was something like the communal cinema (*kommunales Kino*)—a movement that would gain traction in the FRG slightly later, in the mid-1970s.[9] Situating themselves as a "studio" afforded room to maneuver between the space of a formal institution and a communally shared movie house. In that situated space XSCREEN could foreground a complex agenda based around democratization of communication technologies, including media visibility and exploration of the aesthetic and filmic possibilities within the unmarketability of the underground. As the founding manifesto stated, "a fixed system of production, distribution and screening of commercial films, sanctioned by state institutions, has patronized and manipulated the public for years. … [T]he possibilities of the film medium and the horizon of the audience are narrowed by the industrial apparatus in a catastrophic manner."[10]

That the studio was neither a cooperative nor a communal cinema, though adjacent to both, is crucial to understanding the situatedness of its critical lens, specifically oriented as it was around the organization of "programs and not programmatic agendas."[11] Regular screening programs were at the center of the studio's efforts; the group became known for them throughout the international experimental film scene, as well as across underground youth cultures in West Germany. In the beginning XSCREEN Studio rented theaters for monthly midnight screenings because they were the most affordable option, but by late 1968—following their "Underground Explosion"—the demand for more would lead to weekly midnight screenings. This weekly schedule continued for the next three years and eventually moved into a regular theater space, which was rented with support from the city for a secured, low-cost lease. In its first three years XSCREEN organized midnight showings of mixed programs that included everything from educational and industrial film to avant-garde shorts, animated film, and documentary film footage of the Vietnam War and Weimar-period Berlin leftist films that were exemplary of Germany's political film tradition.[12]

A mixture of genres was characteristic of XSCREEN programming. It transformed the theater into a mixed-use space, drawing people together from different sectors within and outside the arts. Sexually explicit works like Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947), Jean Genet's banned *Chant d'Amour* (1950), or Kurt Kren's *6/64 Mama und Papa* (1964) were thus routinely screened (Kren's film was included in the inaugural screening) as part of a much larger project. Scientists might show up for screenings of educational and industrial films and stay for the experimental abstract shorts; youths seeking exposure to sexually explicit materials could be exposed to anti-war documentary reels. Near the end of 1971 Saturday midnight showings of hardcore pornography were also added to the studio's lineup, but these were kept separate from the mixed programs—a financial supplement to the studio's small income, but never a central focus.[13] The notion of underground that XSCREEN followed was not thus about hardcore pornography, and not even only about sexually explicit materials, though the latter was certainly a part of it that led to police intervention on multiple occasions (interestingly no Saturday night screening was ever raided).

By the end of 1972 once pornography was fully legalized in the FRG, state censorship shifted to private lawsuits brought by porn theater owners wanting sole rights for the distribution of the genre's films. As representations of sex and sexuality (both the "pornographic" and "obscene") often associated with an "underground" acquired a legal status under the purview of the state and sexually explicit experimental film began to be absorbed into visual art industries, the slippages between genres held together by their shared economic conditions began to disappear. Before the 1972 legalization of pornography, though, the underground—for XCSREEN anyway—included any kind of film shut out of the commercial mainstream system; it was a site for the formation of different, perhaps new kinds of social relations.

Promoting the underground was a matter of both bringing more visibility to all forms of cultural production that were unmarketable for the film industry proper *and* bringing together different kinds of communities that formed around those scenes.

It was in the precarious position of XSCREEN—poised as it was in the cracks between commercial markets, cooperative routes, communal efforts, and state support, as well as between genres of film—that the tensions between censorship, the legal apparatus, and performing cultural openness became most pronounced. XSCREEN had not fully "dropped out," but neither was it fully embedded in any one programmatic agenda. In the introduction to her 1971 *Film im Underground* XSCREEN cofounder Birgit Hein described the situation:

> Underground film is the latest, least well-established art form in our time. Since it cannot be easily exploited commercially, it still has no market behind it (like, for instance, the book market or art market), which could secure a place for it in the official business of culture. … *But this also means that it is not yet dependent on the official business of culture*, at least for the time being, since scandals such as confiscation, police actions, and resignations from festivals have given it the necessary publicity over the last few years to get enough spectators for regular screenings of films. … This economic outsider position justifies the term [underground] derived from the political situation.[14]

Skirting the consumerist circulation mechanisms of the state's political economy was a powerful way to undermine the West German state, precisely *because* it evaded the capitalist consumer markets for "art" without taking an explicitly communist political position. Refusing to turn the film programming into a politically programmatic agenda, XSCREEN worked against any kind of a state political or commercial market economy. Experimental film refused, in other words, to enact the ways in which the West German state was a "free" and "equal" nation in order to affirm its global position and thus its democratic identity. Hein continued: "Experimental films cannot be easily incorporated into the existing social order as can political films that move entirely within familiar convention."[15] This inability for a smooth assimilation of experimental film—and the underground more generally—into either the state's performances of openness or activist agendas of militancy added more sets of negations to the process of citizen-subject formation: aligned with the co-op framework, XSCREEN had increasingly less to do with solidifying identity along national lines, yet it remained unaligned with any Western Marxist international solidarity programs.

Given the proliferation of negations through which XSCREEN was formulated—not fascist, not state socialist, not quite liberal democratic, not commercial film, not political film—the question of the studio's political orientation had no straightforward answer. This intensified the threat of its underground ad hoc events. The lack of a clear answer drew suspicions from the Left as well as from the Right. During a protest against the 1970 Underground Film Festival in London, which included an XSCREEN program, constituents from both sides of the political spectrum picketed. As one news article described it, the theater "foyer was enlivened by a violent argument between three Maoists and two National Front regulars who turned up to watch the 'corrupt, decadent movies.' Despite their full agreement that the movies should be stopped, they disagreed on ideologies of why."[16] On one side, representing such "lewd" material went against the sense of moral decency supported by the conservative nationalist, and, on the other, such material was seen as counterrevolutionary to the leftist anti-nationalist.

Implicit to the critical task of XSCREEN and the "Underground Explosion" was the political task of anti-censorship. At its foundation the studio was built upon a paradoxical situation: programs were understood by the organizers to be non-adherent to any singular

ideological platform, yet competing ideologies ran side by side through most events they organized. Setting up mixed-genre programs, working tentatively with the state but against its rules of "appropriate" engagement, rejecting a "proper" aesthetic approach to leftist politics, but working in radical ways, XSCREEN laid bare the ideological platforms upon which political economies of the moving image moved. The "public" space of the screening and the public space of politics were intertwined with the "private" space of the family and the community. The critical-political task of anti-censorship was precisely about such entanglements, thwarting yet again the model of social relations upon which the FRG's consumer-based democratic state identity was based. The reconfiguration of audience arena, stage/screen, and media visibility thus was something happening in the films (as in the case of Kren's *23/69 Underground Explosion*), the screening events (as in the XCSREEN Studio mixed programming), and the activities of those involved. It was a total, though certainly not totalizing, reimagining of how individuals could share leisure and labor time.

One thing is clear: for the generation living on the cusp of the 1972 "porn revolution" (when pornography was fully legalized in the FRG), access to different imaginings and imagings of sex and sexuality was as sure to sell out small ad hoc theater spaces as to attract protestors from across the political spectrum. As Birgit Hein has stressed repeatedly, the politics of XSCREEN was oriented around a conception of film and programming that was against censorship in any form. This commitment to anti-censorship was a political act without any particular party affiliations; as the scene in London illuminated, this gained few advocates in a party-based state system. It also did not attract many advocates in the commercial sphere. The foregrounding of cultural materials invisible in mainstream commercial markets that followed from the commitment to anti-censorship was also a threat to a consumer-based market system. It challenged the dominant systems of valuation, setting capital's motions a-spin in ways different from those of documentary-based political film. To work in the film underground, as Birgit Hein has since suggested, was "already a political act."[17]

Explosion at the Kunstmarkt

Exhibitionary event cultures like the one that supported XSCREEN's "Underground Explosion" in October 1968 played a crucial role in the rebuilding of West German cultural life. The first of these events was documenta, the quinquennial one-hundred-day exhibition founded in Kassel in 1955 amidst the wreckage of the war, which was intended to serve as a foil to the German art exhibitions being staged in the FRG's counterpart, the GDR. Documenta became a place-making model for other cities in the FRG looking to raise their visibility on the national and international stages. One such outgrowth of this model was Art Cologne (*Köln Kunstmarkt*), which began in 1967. At the time Cologne was a site of heavy industry in the West German state, and money was flowing into the city domestically as well as from US postwar aid. This economic situation was coupled with a progressive cultural atmosphere, which in those critical years at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s allowed for—even invited—critical-political projects like XSCREEN to develop. Such projects happened with relatively stable acceptance from the Social Democrats (SPD) who dominated the municipal government, as opposed to the centrist-conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) who controlled the federal administration. In this context the fair was envisaged by the group of gallerists who came together to form an association (*Vereinigung*) as a way to draw critical attention and financial interest to the North Rhine-Westphalia urban center. The gallerists negotiated with SPD members of the Cologne Department of Cultural Affairs to host the fair in the city. They were successful, drawing more than fifteen thousand

visitors in 1967, the event's first year.[18] The expansion into "alternative programming" in the second year was prompted by the shared desire of the gallerists and the city to compete with Düsseldorf as *the* cultural destination in the region.[19]

It was in this context, as parallel programming to the art fair, that XSCREEN's "Underground Explosion" was scheduled to happen October 15–19, 1968, in a newly renovated—and still not open to the public—subway station, the Neumarkt U-Bahnhof. Just as the city recognized the advantages of including this kind of "alternative" programming in its commercial collaborations, the studio knew well the benefits of using resources provided by the city and the city's sponsoring of the spectacular commercial event—from support for installation to publicity. It also meant, though, that the studio had to strategically succumb to other limitations that came along with such proximity to the art market, including its uptake of experimentation as a marketing tactic. In the process of raising interest in a lackluster art market, the West German gallery scene constructed a self-image as protector and promoter of "cutting edge" artistic activity. It proved, however, to be an unreliable advocate.[20] Nonetheless, the studio's choice to take municipal support and provisionally join the galleries allowed them to literally move into the city's infrastructural cracks vis-à-vis its underground transit network. The subway station, as any city-dweller knows, is a critical site in urban space—a kind of artery in the lifeline of the city— that allows inhabitants to move around. Like an artery, its constant operation below the surface makes everything possible. The integration of these levels of "mobility" by "Underground Explosion" emphasized the overlaps between state and commercial mechanisms of distribution, and between physical and cultural movement. Such overlaps and the resulting frictions became increasingly visible as the nights of the XSCREEN program wore on.

On the fourth night of "Underground Explosion," shortly before 10:00 p.m., and as Shirley Clarke's *Portrait of Jason* (1967) should have been playing, around seventy police officers gathered outside the subway station's two entrances, blocking them and trapping the attendees underground. It was a raid. Twenty-six films were confiscated, all bags were searched, and everyone inside was rounded up as police "searched for films, young people who had missed their curfew for the nightly homecoming, and criminals."[21] Attendees without identification were detained and those with identification were cross-checked for criminal warrants. The organizers of the event from XSCREEN, as well as other "suspects," were photographed. Cofounder of XSCREEN Rolf Wiest was taken to the station. As a newspaper report on the raid described it, the event and the views of the filmmakers involved had "ruptured the rules of the game of sexual repression."[22] Wiest's arrest was based on suspicion of offense against §184. The police report stated that the activities imaged on screen were "capable of injuring the modesty and morality of an impartial third party by aversion and disgust" and "must therefore be regarded as unkind in the sense of §184."[23]

There are conflicting accounts of what brought law enforcement to the event that night— no complaints remain in the official police file on the raid. Newspaper coverage at the time made mention of a gas station attendant out for a walk with a friend, a detective at the Cologne police department who saw people entering a closed subway station. Upon further investigation, they found a screening underway of "shitting and pissing" (the films of Austrian artist Otto Mühl). As a result the police descended on the event. According to later historical descriptions, however, it was concerned parents who had called into the station, worried that their fifteen-year-old son had gone missing from an event at the nearby *Volkshochschule*. Upon looking for him the couple came upon this event screening illicit materials in the subway station where, though they did not locate their son, they purportedly saw minors.[24] It has also been suggested that the police intervention was actually initiated by "one of the most influential art dealers in Cologne as an assault against city councilman [Kurt] Hackenberg …

aimed at damaging his reputation because the *Kunstmarkt* [Art Cologne] was seen as a competitor to the established craft-based art market of Cologne."[25] XSCREEN was targeted as a means to this end, mobilizing the "porn panic" across the FRG to cast suspicion onto what might be happening at those underground nightly screenings and the art fair sponsoring them. The prevailing panic could have made such a claim not only believable but urgent.

Regardless of what precipitated the raid, the spatial literalization of the underground in the subway station and its spilling over into the streets during a police raid must have been quite a jarring scene: hundreds of bodies pouring onto the street from a closed subway station during the night. The triangulation of audience arena, stage/screen, and press box was massively realigned. Those gathered had physically moved down under the city, electing to participate in order to get away from the FRG's veneer of civil society. In so doing they openly acted in opposition to normative West German culture, which went to great pains to distance the state from the lascivious preceding decades and to appear reconciled with its Nazi past. The threat of opposition to these official tactics of distancing was too risky, and "Underground Explosion" attendees were hastily shuttled back up to the surface—reconfined to the veneer—by police order. The effects of this immersion and subsequent overflow were felt well beyond the subway station, exposing rifts in both the state's and the commercial market's support of experimental film. Though no one was found to be either underage or criminal, tickets were issued and charges were filed (which were abruptly dropped a year later). For undisclosed reasons, the next morning the subway station was closed. "Underground Explosion" came to an apparent end.

Despite the venue closure, convening continued outside of the XSCREEN's programming. The next night at least fifty people showed up at the subway station entrance in a spontaneously generated protest action that drew together different segments from the city's leftist political groups.[26] The demonstration resulted in physical confrontations between protestors and police. This in turn drew the attention of the Association of Progressive German Art Dealers, which denounced the repressive actions of the city's law enforcement.[27] As events unfolded with police and protestors, the gallerists joined in intermittently. On day five, Friday, the fair opened in the morning, but booths were closed by the afternoon because, as gallerist Otto van de Loo (head of the progressive art gallerist's association) stated, "This police action was not directed exclusively against XSCREEN, but against the progressive art in general and the art fair in particular as a forum for this progressive art."[28] Despite calls to shut down the art fair in solidarity and even to move the event to another city, the gallery booths by Saturday morning were opened again; record attendance at the fair persuaded the gallerists to stay. Likewise the support of the state—or at least the city's Department of Cultural Affairs—was also fleeting. In the wake of the protests SPD city council member Kurt Hackenberg defended the police censorship. Hackenberg had initially supported the studio and sponsored its invitation to the fair (and would continue to support XSCREEN's work after 1968), but with his political career possibly at risk, he now denounced the indecency of the films that had been screened:

> The action of the police is absolutely okay! The permanent cultural revolution adamantly demands to be productive creativity. Efficient productive creativity [in the service of] progress [however] is only in: science, medicine, and engineering. Legitimate also is sociology, if it brings with it realizable proposals for the permanent improvement of the form of human society. Man distinguishes himself from mammals only through his creative ability to reason, not through sexual organs. We do not want to be animals, therefore we do not conduct ourselves in carnal respects. … In all states on earth, like the Soviet Union, the USA, China, India, and so forth, individuals who behave as foul animals would be treated as such.[29]

Hackenberg's public statement reveals the prevailing conservative sexual politics of the state and much more. The specter of Nazi ideology in his words (e.g., the language of human improvement) is palpable. Respectability—and humanity itself—were tied to scientific knowledge and rationality, progress connected to concrete propositions for change. Scientific research and possibly some work in the social sciences could support this, but art and aesthetics had no place in such matters. This approach to knowledge and progress, he concluded, was a guiding force in the FRG as in other important states on the international stage (to which, one could infer, the FRG should be compared), including both the United States and the Soviet Union. Gesturing at a supposed morality that transcended even the ideological and organizational divides of Cold War politics, the West German politician made clear that the city's support of experimental art had little to do with political commitments.

The city's attempt to brand itself as a center of art and experimentation backfired. Fliers were distributed, lines were drawn, and political watchdog groups of state censorship quickly got involved. Hundreds, if not thousands, showed up outside Cologne's main police station with signs demanding the resignation of the SPD political officials who supported police terror (Figure 4.2). Some demonstrators even stormed the city's opera house, taking the stage in protest. Where XSCREEN had just a few months earlier been met by disapproval from activists concerned with the political complicity of experimental filmmaking, here they became

FIGURE 4.2 Benno Josef Wiersch (*Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger* staff photographer), Protesters at the "Underground Explosion" anti-censorship demonstration, Cologne Police Station. *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, October 21, 1968. Reprinted in *XSCREEN: Materialien über den Underground-Film*, 1971.

what film historian Randall Halle has called "a Lefitist *cause cèlèbre*."[30] The convening found itself at the center of political battles happening in the streets, which ranged from imperial wars abroad to representations of sex and sexuality domestically. After the projection booth at "Underground Explosion" was dismantled and the film canisters confiscated, images associated with the event continued to show crowds of people crammed together in spaces like the police station plaza or the theater stage—spaces of dissent that were resolutely outside of official forums like those being created during the lunch sessions within the art fair following its reopening. The confrontational situation stretched the boundaries of audience, screen/stage, and media relationships, as it also tested the limits of state and commercial institutional provision. Sometimes XSCREEN accepted the support of the state and/or the commercial art market, and other times, like this one, they relied on the backing of New Left student groups and leftist organizations. They formed contradictory and explosive sets of alliances, indeed.

Such a convening—in the subway station and later in the streets—was possible because of XSCREEN's by-any-means-necessary approach, and its willingness to engage simultaneously in contradictory alliances—with the state, the art market, and the radical Left. XSCREEN gained support from one arm of the state, the city council, which afforded it the material means by which to produce the Underground Explosion convening and provided legibility for the studio within the art fair context. It was through another arm of the state, law enforcement, and its counterpoint of activism that XSCREEN gained public visibility for programs of experimental art. The state's international vision for itself as a culturally open democratic nation ran headlong into its highly contested national interests in regulating access to sex and sexuality. Maneuvering in the narrow openings between these interests, the studio maintained its commitment to an anti-censorship position. Such an orientation to the underground also hit limits though. At the same time the XSCREEN program faced censorship by the state, it was the state that enlisted participation of the studio in the art fair to raise the cultural prestige of the event. This contradictory situation seemed to pit legibility—interpolation into a sustainable economic structure—against visibility—representation within a media landscape. In such a situation the call for visibility was disaggregated from legibility. Yes, the studio's programming strategy represented, or made visible, its complex sets of negations—not fascist, not state socialist, not quite liberal democratic, not commercial film, not political film, and now not visual art project. It remained, however, illegible within the fair's market structure, which was organized around an interest in sales, not solidarity struggles. As Hein has since recounted, XSCREEN was caught in a paradox: in the interest of visibility, it was unable to totally join the protestors' demands to shut down the fair; it was also unable to totally join the gallerists in their request for the fair to go on.[31]

Conclusions

It was the commitment to anti-censorship that formed the core of the XSCREEN Studio's critical-political project, leading them to a non-nation-state-based economic vision of circulation. The legal situations that erupted at events like "Underground Explosion" exemplify the complicated and convoluted ways in which accusations of "obscenity" were instrumentally mobilized in the service of the state's political and commercial "democratic" interests. The tensions between state censorship of underground cinema, which accompanied reconstruction of the terms of national identity, and global presentations of support, which were aimed at strengthening West Germany's international face and its relations with other nations (from Poland to the United States), are the deep legacies of the Cold War's soft

power tactics in the European art circuit. Such tensions remain at the center of what it means today to perform cultural openness. It was in the cracks opened up by these tensions—cracks occupied by events like "Underground Explosion"—that different means of distribution and, by extension, configurations of social relations were imagined and, even if only momentarily, brought into practice. The story of XSCREEN and its negotiations of "art" and "obscenity" should serve today as a timely reminder that sometimes both imagining *and* practicing critique and politics differently—in the alongsides and the in betweens—are possible.

Notes

1 Peter Weibel, interviewed by author, June 15, 2017.

2 Elizabeth Heineman, *Before Porn Was Legal: The Erotica Empire of Beate Uhse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 27–60.

3 Uta Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 31–70.

4 Linda Williams, *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 93–119.

5 Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels*, 106–36.

6 For more on the Oberhausen Manifesto and its effects, see Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

7 Box 101, folder 3–6, Otto Mühl Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2011.M.38).

8 "Kölner Studio für den unabhängigen Film." Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Archiv der Avantgarden, C 1/Film Archiv Birgit und Wilhelm Hein 20.

9 "Cologne Studio for Independent Film."

10 "Cologne Studio for Independent Film."

11 Phrase taken from Birgit Hein's description of XSCREEN's political position as stated in conversation with author, April 17, 2017.

12 Hein, conversation with author, January 16, 2017.

13 Hein, conversation with author, July 21, 2019.

14 Birgit Hein, "Film in Underground," reprinted and translated in *Film als Idee: Birgit Hein's Texts on Art and Film*, ed. and trans. Nanna Heidenreich (Berlin: Vorwerk Verlag, 2016), 236; italics added.

15 Hein, "Film in Underground," 259.

16 "Foyer Fürore: Fascists Taunt Reds" in *OzNews: International Film Festival Supplement*, October 30, 1970. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Archiv der Avantgarden, C 1/Film Archiv Birgit und Wilhelm Hein 14.

17 Hein, conversation with author, January 16, 2017.

18 See "Kunstmarkt Köln 1967," *Artblog Cologne*, April 7, 2016, https://www.artblogcologne.com/en/from-zadik-kunstmarkt-koeln-67/; and Günter Herzog, "A History of the First Modern Art Fair: 1967–1969." https://www.artcologne.com/fair/art-cologne/geschichte_der_art/.

19 Enno Stahl, "'Kulturkampf' in Köln. Die XSCREEN-Affäre 1968," *Geschichte im Westen* 22 (2007): 177–200. http://www.brauweiler-kreis.de/wp-content/uploads/GiW/GiW2007/GiW_2007_STAHL_KULTURKAMPF.pdf

20 See the XSCREEN's post-event report in *XSCREEN: Materialen über den Underground-film*, ed. Wilhelm Hein, Birgit Hein, Christian Michelis, and Rolf Wiest (Köln: Phaidon, 1971), 116.

21 Stahl, "'Kulturkampf' in Köln."

22 Stahl, "'Kulturkampf' in Köln."

23 Police report reproduced in *XSCREEN: Materialen über den Underground-film*, 117; translated by author.

24 Stahl, "'Kulturkampf' in Köln."

25 Gabriele Jutz and Birgit Hein, "Interview: Gabriele Jutz with Birgit Hein," in *X-Screen: Film Installations and Actions in the 1960s and 1970s*, ed. Matthias Michalka and Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (Köln: Walther König, 2004), 121.

26 Wilfried Reichart, "Neue Wege des Films: XSCREEN," in *Köln 68! Protest, Pop, Provokation*, ed. Michaela Keim and Stefan Lewejohann (Mainz am Rhein, Germany: Nünnerich-Asmus Verlag & Media GmbH, 2018), 352–9.

27 Stahl, "'Kulturkampf' in Köln," translated by author.

28 Otto van de Loo, "Protokoll einer Polizeiaktion gegen die progressive Kunst," in *XSCREEN: Materialen über den Underground-film,* 116.

29 Transcription of Kurt Hackenberg's public statement in *XSCREEN: Materialen über den Underground-film*, 115.

30 Randall Halle, "Xscreen1968: Material Film Aesthetics and Radical Cinema Politics," *A Journal of History, Politics and Culture* 10, no. 1 (2017): 11.

31 Birgit Hein, conversation with author, July 16, 2019.

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PLATE 7 Still from Kurt Kren, 23/69 *Underground Explosion*, 1969. 16mm, color, sound, 5:30. Courtesy of sixpackfilm.

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Edited by
Catha Paquette
Karen Kleinfelder
Christopher Miles