

Texts by
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Lord of the Frames: Kurt Kren

>In 1964, the film lab "Wien Film" refused to print *6/64 Mama und Papa*. When Kurt Kren handed in the original, the film grader said with an undertone of sympathy that, given the many cuts, one would not be able to make out anything, anyway. His worries were groundless: when Kren came to pick up the print, some people with flushed faces left the projection room, telling him to get out and never to come back again. A few months later, a similar scene took place at "Listo", where *9/64 O Tannenbaum* was not accepted. Kren ultimately found a place that took his films, based on actions by Otto Muehl and Guenter Brus: a house on Peter Kaiser Gasse in Jedlersdorf, a neighborhood in the East of Vienna, on the other side of the river Danube. There, in the 21st district, on the most remote outskirts of town, films were developed and printed in self-made contraptions reminiscent of washing-machine drums. The man who ran the business single-handedly intimated that he was used to explicit images owing to customers from the blue movie scene. The facts that the credits in a few Kren works from those days are slightly out of place and that the name "Kren" next to the copyright sign goes beyond the edge of the frame can be explained in this context. On request, credits were in-house productions, but they were made with a camera that had no view finder, for which reason slipped boards were none too unusual. There were no objections to the films' content, formal and creative issues played a secondary role.

Be that as it may – the "© Kren" jutting out over the frame can easily be understood as a metaphor of the avant-garde and a harbinger of cinema outside the screen – Expanded Cinema. It is precisely during the "Jedlersdorf period" in his oeuvre that Kurt Kren demonstrates some of its best knacks to modern cinematography.

In his essay "On the question of form" dating from 1912, Wassily Kandinsky proclaimed that the "Great Abstraction" and "Great Realism" were equivalent. Kandinsky's text marks the acme of a development in Western art that started in the late Middle Ages and can be followed stringently ever since the renaissance. It is a development that oscillates between two polarities: on the one hand, there is a type of painting that sets aspects of form and composition aside to depict nature as accurately as possible. On the other hand, there is the opposite type of painting that strives for the strict adherence to formal principles in all its idealizing styles. This longing for a lofty reproduction of reality, which concurrently seeks to express that which is hidden behind the appearances, unites a great variety of styles and artists, such as idealizing Classicism, Gauguin, Expressionism and Mondrian's extreme formalization of the phenomenal world along the same lines of visual development. Kandinsky deals with what he calls the other genealogy of modern art which is based on "realistic" art striving to depict everything true to nature. However, when it turns away from space to represent the moment as we perceive it, it introduces the component of time into the structure of the picture, something reflected in the light application of paint, in sketchy freehand drawings: objects become volatile. The imminent renunciation of form found in Naturalism (the reproduction of phenomena the way they appear) eventually leads – via Impressionism – to a two-pronged approach ending in the disintegration of form: in Kandinsky's free abstraction and in the extreme realism of the ready-made and comparable collages of objects from the workshops of the Dadaists. The Great Abstraction foregoes the mediation of the perceptual world and represents the creative media themselves; the Great Realism foregoes representation, substituting for it the object itself. To put it in a nutshell, the names Kandinsky, Mondrian and Marcel Duchamp map out the terrain wherein twentieth century art is located. As we all know, the aesthetic issues at stake in the conflicts between these positions in the visual arts also come to bear on cinematography with some delay. Their impact is all the more tremendous, and Kurt Kren's contribution in this context is no less than outstanding, from a global perspective, too.

Guenter Brus and Otto Muehl: they depart from the easel painting and use the human body as their expressive central means in art. This common trait tends to obscure the fundamental differences between their actions. On the one hand, Brus and his grandiose pathos belong to the tradition of Expressionism. The way in which he uses paint gives it a continuing central function as a link between body, surrounding space and delimiting surfaces. On the other hand, Muehl is the Dadaist among the Actionists. His version of realism does not need the expressively fraught double bottom of a special world of signs (as in Brus's surgical gauze, scalpels, scissors, razor blades and tacks). Muehl's staged realities are still lives of paint, refuse and food in motion, spirited, and devoid of symbolic or allegorical allusions. Where Brus arranges a *mise-en-scène* of creatures suffering, Muehl is looking for fun.

Kurt Kren enters the picture amidst these two contrasting Actionist programs – and he, too, reacts in strikingly different ways. Ever since his second film – *2/60 48 Kopfe aus dem Szondi-Test* – Kren had organized his material according to serial rules.*1* He counteracted the mimetic abundance of the film with brittle mathematical principles (the length of a take was determined from the sum total of the two preceding takes: 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34 frames). All his early films were edited in the camera by means of the single frame mechanism. Kren lastingly made his mark in the history of cinematography when he developed his flash-editing technique from his fifth film onward – *5/62 Fenstergucker, Abfall, etc.* is characterized by cuts down to single frames. Here, too, the sequence was determined by serial patterns laid down in scores.

The serial flash editing technique is what Kren uses to create a contrast to "Realist" Muehl's actions. Unlike single-frame editing in the camera, real editing enables a much more appropriate option to formalize within the sequence of images. A single-frame process in nature, as shown in *3/60 Baeume im Herbst*, has no repetitions; each frame holds a new view in store. In the first action he filmed, *6/64 Papa und Mama*, Kren's editing leads to many interlocking continuous shots; central takes recur like a leitmotif, circular motion and networking can be observed throughout the film. Kren painstakingly weaves the fury in front of his camera lens into dense geometrical figures. Shot/countershot sequences alternate, jumping back and forth between single (!) frames, they turn the Actionist turmoil into ornaments, rigid geometrical patterns, the equivalent in time to what Mondrian used to distill on canvas in space. Then comes Kren's first film with Guenter Brus *8/64 Ana – Aktion Brus*. The expressive style Kren is suddenly confronted with makes him depart from seriality and flash editing. His response is the "Great Abstraction." Free gestural photography corresponds to Brus's pathos; Kren pumps images of Tachist disintegration onto the film strip. While flash editing had made Muehl's actions rage, the repetitive qualities had ensured that the "moving ornament" was still legible. The single-frame process Kren uses to record Brus's action as if writing with his camera makes the image almost less than discernible; *10b/65 Silber – Aktion Brus* floats even more freely in the pre-representational haze of gestural traces. When Kren steadies his camera a little more for a change, he is less interested in the action than in the abstract traces left by the act of painting – the splashes of paint on the studio walls. Where Dadaist Muehl celebrates Naturalism taken to extremes, Kren responds by strategies of concentration as found in Mondrian, and Expressionism, for that matter. Confronted with Expressionism as continued in Brus's actions, Kren resorts to the "Great Abstraction", clearing the board of all signs fraught with meaning. However, there are two exceptions to this rule: *9/64 O Tannenbaum* featuring Muehl is characterized by the use of the single frame mechanism and a static camera; *10/65 Selbstverstummelung* shows Brus in relatively long takes following an A-B-C-B-C-D-C-D-E-etc. pattern. These two films do without applying an aesthetic opposite in terms of structure, and as a result, they are comparatively documentary in character.

The dialogue with Modernism, which Kren had an important share in shaping, can be tracked down in most of his 49 films. Not even Dadaist realism is missing in *18/68 Venecia kaputt*, in *27/71 Auf der Pfaueninsel*, in *29/73 Ready-made*, in his expanded movies. But let's move on to Kren's latest film, thirty years after he started.

In 1995 Kurt Kren turned the centenary of the cinema into a commemorative year. The office "hundertjahrekino" commissioned him to make a trailer which he gave the title *tausendjahrekino*.*2* For several weeks, Kren filmed tourists in the square in front of St. Stephen's in Vienna while they were taking pictures of the cathedral or recording it on video. He used frequencies of 2, 4 and 8 frames per second and touched the limits of his lens: maximum focal length (66 mm) and minimum distance (1.2 meters). The takes are usually two to four frames long, they do not follow any fixed rule. The soundtrack is a brief sequence from Peter Lorre's movie *Der Verlorene* (FRG 1951) in which a drunkard recognizes a killer protected by the Nazis, accosts him and repeats over and over again: "We've met before, I don't know where, but we've met before. . . ." "When the end of the film draws near, the same voice is heard again over the din of an air alert: 'Everybody down to the heroes' shelter, everybody die a hero. . . .' Kren associates the anniversary of cinematography with the Third Reich, which was to last a thousand years. 'One Hundred Years of Cinema' also means images ruling for one hundred years, images which have lost their referentiality and come to dominate reality. The question is whether the tourists will actually 'have come to know' St. Stephen's Cathedral. When the voice on the sound track sends everybody down to the heroes' shelter, Kren pans up St. Stephen's, his camera shaking. At the end of the film he seems to seek the lost reality of the cathedral, but it has been bombed by the images."*3* The technical-formal givens mentioned above arouse curiosity beyond such an interpretation. Tourists taking pictures of cathedrals and similarly large structures may inevitably move the onlooker to ask: "How do you get such a big building into such a small thing?" The trivial technical reply would be: infinity focusing and the longest focal length possible – a wide-angle lens. As regards the focal length of the cameras used, Kren positions himself (as said above) on the opposite end of the scale from the tourists: maximum focal length and minimum distance. But that is not the only

point. Instead of seeking clarity by keeping his distance (infinity focusing), thus concerning himself with mimesis, he gets as close to reality as his lens allows him to. The low frequency of frames he works with stipulate long exposure times: in combination with a hand-held camera and telelens, this leads to rather blurred images. Again, we have arrived at the figure of handwriting on the way to Kandinsky's "Great Abstraction," and again, Kren wants to visualize the other side of the appearances.

What about the people whose outlines haunt Kren's hazy shots? They all look at the cathedral through their view finders, at the sculptures in the round adorning its facade. These sculptures in the round of human bodies standing freely are precisely the objects via which perceptual reality began to enter the realm of art in the late Middle Ages. These sculptures were the first formulations of a program that was ultimately to be implemented by the Renaissance, and its visual echo is still refracted by every camera lens of this world. In *tausendjahrekino*, we witness a meeting with the "Lucy" of the photo, film and video generation: these Gothic fossils are to photographic mimesis what the first mother of humankind is to anthropologists. The only difference is that the participants in this family reunion on St. Stephen's Square are not aware of the fact that they are related. "We've met before, I don't know where, but we've met before..." For Kren, this is tausendjahremimesis, and no end to it.

Translation: Elisabeth Frank-Großebner
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- *1* For a detailed analysis of his first, pre-serial film *1/57 Versuch mit synthetischem Ton* cf. Tscherkassky, Peter: Die rekonstruierte Kinematographie. In: Horwath, A./Ponger, L./Schlemmer, G. (eds.): Avantgardefilm. Oesterreich 1950 bis heute, Vienna 1995, p. 41-44.
- *2* Kren has been making films to order for some time: *44/84 foot' age shoot'-out* was the first commission, three trailers (*45/88 Trailer*; *46/90 Falter 2*; *49/95 tausendjahrekino*) and an episode for the compilation *Denkwuerdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken*, part 3 (1993, dir.: P. Tscherkassky, after Ernst Schmidt jr., posthum) followed. Moreover, in 1996 Kren will be on screen playing a hard-rocking bishop who is also an expert stripper for the cinema advertising film of the movie magazine "Meteor" (directed by Franz Novotny).
- *3* Jutz, Gabriele: Eine Poetik der Zeit. Kurt Kren und der strukturelle Film. In: Scheugl, Hans (ed.): Ex Underground. Kurt Kren, seine Filme. Vienna 1996, p. 109.

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