



Fig. 1 Photograph of Kurt Kren and Birgit Hein with Hein's daughter Nina, n.d., silver gelatin print on paper, 8.9 x 13 cm, unknown photographer.

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*"It Was the Way We Lived": On Underground Cinema, Reproductive Labor, and Curating*

*In the winter of 2016, I sat in the home of experimental filmmaker Birgit Hein (Berlin, 1942–2023) in Berlin; together we watched a digital copy of her and former husband Wilhelm Hein's home movie film London 1973. The film was a mixture of scenes from public and private life, ranging from a weekend outing with Hein and Tony Conrad's families at a park in Cologne to an informal meeting of Birgit Hein, Jonas Mekas, and other young filmmakers outside the National Film Theater in London. The two types of convening, as the film's editing suggests, were consistently intertwined. When I asked about this, Hein responded simply: "It was the way we lived." Her words are the catalyst for this set of reflections, and, with deep admiration, it is to her memory that they are dedicated.*

Following a landmark international experimental film festival known as EXPRMNTL, which was held in 1967 in the Belgian seaside city of Knokke, the cooperative movement of filmmakers that 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. Attempts to form a European Filmmakers Cooperative followed the initial 1967 convening. Though such a cooperative never came to fruition, it precipitated the establishment of robust networks of communication between local settings from Amsterdam to Rome, eventually reaching Poland and Yugoslavia.

Each cooperative took on particular characteristics in response to specificities of its context. The cooperatives were invested not in building national identity, but in creating collective group identities. While the Hamburg Co-op in the northern West German port city primarily consisted of filmmakers connected to the commercial scene, for instance, the Austria Filmmakers Co-op in Vienna invested its efforts in demonstrations against what co-op members saw as fascist elements in state art institutions but also the market capitulations of a liberal “democratizing” order. Unwieldy as these systems and events were, 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.

XSCREEN Kölner Studio für unabhängigen Film (XSCREEN) was a cultural association established in the West German city of Cologne in 1968 by a group of thirteen critics, artists, and filmmakers (amongst them Birgit Hein) with the mission of creating more opportunities and access to noncommercial and independent (*unabhängigen*) film. Like the co-op movement, XSCREEN was an outgrowth of the momentum amassed in Knokke, and its members (especially Hein) were particularly active in efforts to connect and convene. Underground and informal gatherings like the ones the Studio organized—at its height, weekly—nourished the network aesthetically and intellectually, providing new filmic forms and cinematic experiences. They also sustained the network in more substantive ways.

Though not often politically spotlighted in the tumultuous history of West Germany’s long 1960s, several of the Studio’s screenings drew police presence and materials were confiscated more than once. There were never any convictions, but some reels may still be in evidence lockup in a Munich police department.<sup>1</sup> Arrests, arraignments, seizures of films, and raids at both screening

<sup>1</sup> “Interview: Gabriel Jutz with Birgit Hein,” in Branden Joseph, *et al.*, *X-Screen: Film Installations and Actions in the 1960s and 1970s* (Köln: Walther König, 2004), 118-129.



Fig. 2 Collage with cut out article “Krach beim Fest der Streifen-Macher” (BILD, March 8, 1969), 29,5 x 19 cm.

sites and in homes—most practically the professional and personal—regularly crossed in the work of XSCREEN along legal lines. Given the high stakes of their shared struggles against the state’s repeated charges of general obscenity, members of the Studio’s network also came together as a support system. The aesthetic and the social, like the political and the spatial, were linked. The construction of underground economies of circulation was—often out of necessity—the convening of personal communities as well.

These kinds of reproductive practices were thoroughly entangled with the forms of filmmaking and screening event organization that became possible. Moreover, as I gesture to throughout, the gender politics at play in these practices are by no means an easy fit within a “good” feminist trajectory of analysis—questions of empowerment and liberation remain slippery. Hein herself bemoaned her life that feminists of the 1970s and 80s looked upon her with suspicion because of the abstract nature of her early work (and, later, conversely, for its “pro-sex” position), as well as for her close connections to powerful men within film networks in West Germany. Because of this tension, Hein herself rejected the title of “feminist,” even as she steadfastly worked to support women and gender non-conforming filmmakers and artists in various ways until of her life. As a historian, I find myself thus stuck between reading on-the-ground praxis and ideologically politicized lines of identification. Faced with such an impasse, I think it is precisely through a feminist trajectory of analysis of power, with all of the questions of social reproduction embedded therein, that the filmmakers’ cooperatives, their circulation and event structures, and the organizing practice of Birgit Hein should be read.

### Traveling Together

A kind of kinship network emerged. In some senses, the XSCREEN network was, from its inception, rooted in family; three of its five members were related. Christian Michelis and Birgit Hein were

siblings; Birgit and Wilhelm Hein were married; Wilhelm and Karlheinz Hein (a frequent collaborator, though not a co-founder of the Studio) were brothers. This situation created a certain domestic sensibility that distinguished the projects from other transnational filmmakers’ cooperatives active at the time, such as the New York or London co-ops, as well as from later communal cinemas that would emerge in the FRG. From the Studio’s first convening in March 1968 for a program of Austrian experimental films, a close exchange between the groups in Cologne and Vienna developed. In particular, Kurt Kren became close friends with the XSCREEN cofounders, and the relationships that developed from there would shape the lives of all involved over the next decade.

When Kren left Vienna in 1970 facing legal accusations for supposed distribution of pornography, he moved to Cologne. There he became a fixture of the flourishing underground scene, traveling and often living with the Heins, as well as, on occasion, with Hans Peter Kochenrath (another cofounder of XSCREEN) or with Karlheinz Hein in Munich. It was while living with Kochenrath that Kren produced his enigmatic time-lapse portrait *28/73 Zeitaufnahme(n)*; and it was at the Kochenrath’s cabin in rural southwest Germany that Kren made his acclaimed structural film *31/75 Asyl*, which required twenty-one days of consecutive shooting from the same standpoint. *32/76 An W+B* was made similarly, while Kren lived in the Heins’ apartment, by shooting out the same window over a two-month period. Across these works from Kren’s classic structural phase, especially in the latter two, the conditions of the films’ production depended on the shared living situation and the stability it offered—most basically each of the pieces required the ability to film at one location for an extended amount of time.

In Kren’s case, the home was a place where he could set up the camera to look outward, but elsewhere the camera was pointed inward, toward the shared living experiences happening in those domestic spaces. A suite of travel photos and home movie footage produced at the time document these living experiences.



Fig. 3 Kurt Kren, *31/75 ASYL*, 1975, 16mm film, color, silent, 8'26.



Fig. 4 The XSCREEN WV bus tour, c. 1969, silver gelatin print on paper, 12.6 x 17.7 cm, unknown photographer.

Mostly taken by Birgit's husband Wilhelm Hein, the scattered materials, which range from 1969 through 1973, pull together a kind of portrait of life in the XSCREEN's underground. Several snapshots exist of one particular "family trip" to Cannes in 1969. During the same spring that the Underground Explosion concert was touring the FRG, the XSCREEN group traveled to the French resort town together in a VW bus. They had been invited to curate a program for La Quinzaine des Réalisateurs, an "alternative film festival" organized by the Cinema en Liberté, which ran in Cannes concurrent with the well-known international festival hosted annually since 1946 in the French Riviera resort town. This counter-festival relied upon its proximity to the prominent "official" commercial film festival for visibility, even as it aggressively rejected institu-

tional economic systems and aesthetic priorities. La Quinzaine des Réalisateurs reflected a broader interest, which had developed almost immediately after '68, in assimilating noncommercial, anti-institutional curated programs into mainstream market-adjacent economies. Even the 1970 Venice Biennale included a program on underground cinema.<sup>2</sup> While underground convenings began to make regular appearances at, or adjacent to, official sites like this, the infrastructure to support them remained provisional at best. In some situations, support was politically tentative; at other times, as in Cannes, the support was economically scant.

The XSCREEN group's trip came about because they had no money for a hotel in the posh Mediterranean city, nor was there funding from the Cinema en Liberté to assist them. Instead, XSCREEN members camped in the Préalpes d'Azur Natural Regional Park roughly twenty kilometers away, where Kren and Karlheinz surveyed the campsite. Shirtless and in jeans, they scan the grounds looking for suitable places to set up the tents. Later they sunbathe together, both now wearing bathing suit bottoms. Kren wears dark sunglasses and a black turtleneck with his suit, maintaining a cool '60s look, even as he partakes in the vernacular outdoor vacation activity of campsite lounging. He sits in a folding chair with bearded chin resting in hand and his head turned towards Karlheinz, who looks up from his prone position on the ground. In another shot, Kren stands alone amidst the park's shrubbery. Still in his sunglasses but now with the turtleneck removed, he stands with his feet shoulder width apart wearing a speedo, black socks, and shoes. He holds something in his hands, perhaps a bundle of brush to contribute to the campfire or maybe a camera that he is drawing up to his eye to begin filming.

At dusk and now fully clothed again, Kren sits eating with Birgit Hein at a picnic table. While a third person sitting at the edge of the

<sup>2</sup> See Biennale Program, Box 4, "Propaganda—1967-1970," Birgit Hein Papers, Marzona Collection, Archiv der Avantgarden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden.



Fig. 5 Karlheinz (in the middle), Kurt Kren (on the right) and a friend in the South of France, c. 1969, silver gelatin print on paper, 8 x 9.5 cm, unknown photographer.

table is almost completely obscured by the dimness of the fading light, Kren and Hein seem almost to glow with dramatic, aura-like silhouettes against the thick, dark wall of trees behind them. In all of these photos the subjects—the filmmakers and curators—pay no attention to the camera. Sometimes they pay no attention to each other; they are merely in the midst of camping.

## Hosting One Another

Back in Cologne, the Heins' one-bedroom apartment also fostered numerous instances of cohabitation and convening. During the late 1960s and early '70s their small home became a site of critical exchange amongst German-speaking and international filmmakers alike. Filmmakers and their families would often stay at the Heins' apartment, sharing meals and sleeping spaces with the XSCREEN members. A series of home movies made between 1970 and 1973 show that an intermingling—or perhaps willful confusion—of the public and the private was typical at the Hein residence. The living room could become a makeshift screening site; the coffee table, an editing table; and the kitchen table a place for debates to run into the early hours of the morning.

Such was the case, for instance, in 1971 when the Heins hosted New York experimental filmmaker Jack Smith who took up residence in the apartment for several days, overlapping with Kren's longer-term stay. In one of the home movies Smith and Kren sit in the living room. Smith carefully reviews his slides for a performance of his *Boiled Lobster Color Slide Show*, which he gave at a space in Cologne the following week.<sup>3</sup> He sits in an armchair examining his images through a viewfinder while Kren reclines on the couch smoking a cigarette. From the doorway on their right, which leads into the kitchen, Birgit Hein moves in and out of the frame as she both cooks a meal for everyone while also offering her thoughts in conversation with her male counterparts.

That Hein was performing the traditional female labor of cooking the family meal is not totally surprising—these kinds of conventionally gendered labor dynamics operated largely unbroken alongside the widespread embrace of the tenets of sexual revolution.

<sup>3</sup> For more on Jack Smith's slide shows, see Darsie Alexander *et al.*, eds., *Slideshow: Projected Images in Contemporary Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2005).

This remained a contradiction throughout the period, both in the XSCREEN underground and elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> For as much as the private sphere of the home became a part of the public work of curating screening programs, the integration of the aesthetic and the social in the XSCREEN's underground was not as smooth as one might imagine. As with the impasses and inconsistencies that the Studio faced in its attempts to integrate the political and the spatial at public-facing convenings like *Underground Explosion*, there were impasses and inconsistencies to face in private convenings as well.

Birgit Hein's central role in XSCREEN convenings, from *Underground Explosion* to hosting visiting filmmakers and their families, thwarts a simplistic gender narrative built on binary possibilities (e.g., empowerment or subservience). The situation was more complicated than that, as was Hein's own relationship to feminist politics. Coming of age on the cusp of the 1970s feminist movement, Hein's conceptions of gender, sexuality, and the family were largely formed prior to a widespread feminist consciousness; though she regularly advocated for women filmmakers alongside their male counterparts—she herself worked side-by-side in a collaborative duo with her husband—she did not necessarily offer a critique of systemic imbalances in the day-to-day politics of living. Yes, the family structure propagated by the FRG was to be dismantled, as were the sexually repressive mores and censorship practices of the state's cultural and legal policies that upheld that familial structure; but it was still Birgit who cooked and tended to childcare. Tellingly, though, this responsibility was sometimes shared with Kren, who spent a great deal of time with Birgit and Wilhelm's daughter Nina. In several snapshots from the time Kren and Birgit sat together with Nina, taking turns holding the small child. This was not the standard, however.

<sup>4</sup> Among the vast body of work on this subject, see in particular: David Allyn, *Make Love, Not War: The Sexual Revolution, An Unfettered History* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and Paula England, "The Gender Revolution: Uneven and Stalled," *Gender & Society*, vol. 24, no. 2 (April 2010): 149-66.

Such disconnects between a public critical-political mission and the realities of home life were not unusual, but under the conditions of the XSCREEN's underground—moving between public and private convenings as it did—these disconnects were that much more palpable. Instead of realigning gender dynamics, Hein tended, rather, to take on both the labor of the programming and the labor of the home. She did everything, setting up a highly unsustainable (though certainly admirable) model for women in the underground: she was the primary engine behind the programming, and she was the caretaker for each person that passed through the Hein apartment in Cologne for screening events—cooking meals, providing clean blankets and towels, and so forth. She was also the first person to write the history of underground, experimental, and avant-garde film for a German-speaking audience in her 1971 *Film im Underground*, and she was also raising her daughter Nina.

As Nina got older, she also often attended the screening events—whenever possible it was she who was in charge of turning on and off lights during her parents *Superman and Wonderwoman Performance*. On one flyer for the event, Nina inserted a crayon drawing of herself into the photograph of the projection/performance space, writing “this is N. Hein” [“*dies ist N. Hein*”] and explaining her important role in the project.<sup>5</sup> This was a situation of both/and. There was both a kind of upholding of the conventions of gendered labor and, yet, there was also a way that such domestic labor and family life became folded in with the work of filmmaking, programming, and scholarship, both on- and offstage.

The family environment—Nina and other children—figured largely into the home movie footage alongside historic meetings between well-known filmmakers. These offscreen overlaps between

<sup>5</sup> This particular image was also reproduced in the Heins' 1985 publication of materials from the XSCREEN archive. See Hoffmann and Schobert, eds., *W + B Hein: Dokumente, 1967–1985 Fotos, Briefe, Texte* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsches Filmmuseum, 1985).

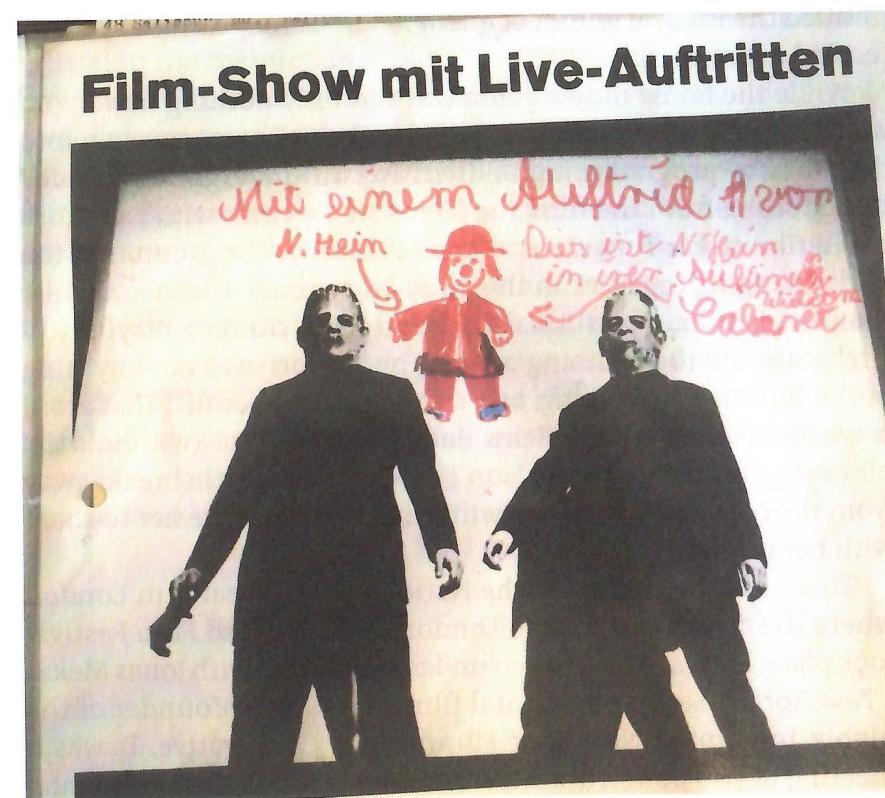


Fig. 6 Poster for expanded cinema show by Wilhelm and Birgit Hein, 1980, b&w photocopy on paper with hand drawing by Nina Hein, 29.7 x 21 cm.

the “personal” and “professional” spheres, even as they reproduced certain elements of normative gender dynamics, were brought explicitly on-screen as well. Such intersections were the subject of the Heins’ home movie film *London 1973*, which premiered at an experimental film festival in 1974. The film documented a series of convenings in 1973 that the Heins participated in, from hanging out with visiting filmmakers in Cologne, to the Heins’ travels to London for the second iteration of the London Underground Film Festival

(retitled the Festival of Independent Avant-Garde Film that year by festival organizers).<sup>6</sup>

While the home movie genre was certainly nothing new by '74, what was new was the visibility of "family life" as interwoven into the work of programming and writing an underground scene.<sup>7</sup> In one scene from the film, the Heins sit together with New York-based filmmaker Tony Conrad and his family. The group is at the park, lounging together in the grass on a sunny afternoon while their toddlers lob a plastic ball back and forth, running playfully in circles around the reclining adults. The "action" was not anything of the filmmakers' making, but, rather, it was a conflict that arose between the children: the Heins' daughter attempts to withhold the plastic ball from the Conrads' son Theodore. Birgit Hein breaks away from the conversation to talk with Nina and convince her to share with her peer.

This time she is outside the National Film Theater in London where the screenings for the London Underground Film Festival took place. Hein sits on a bench underneath a tree with Jonas Mekas, a New York-based experimental filmmaker and cofounder of the highly influential New York Filmmakers' Cooperative. It was a meeting of two powerful voices in the international experimental film scene, and a meeting of US and European perspectives. Hein and Mekas face toward each other in conversation as a group of other filmmakers, seated on the grass below, listen on. Both the family outing in the park and the legendary meeting of Mekas and Hein, the film proposes, were part of the same underground network.

<sup>6</sup> The shift in title that year reflected a broader absorption of underground film into the market structures of avant-garde art. This shift was described by festival co-organizer David Curtis in conversation with the author, June 2, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> See Carrie Smith-Prei, *Revolting Families: Toxic Intimacy, Private Politics and Literary Realisms in the German Sixties* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

Both convenings, like the group camping trip to Cannes, was crucial to the maintenance of the underground, which could not have survived on curated programs alone, no matter how "explosive" those convenings were. Indeed, those "explosions" were constitutively contingent on an infrastructural support network, which not only created opportunities for distribution and exhibition of noncommercial and anti-institutional film, but also provided housing, meals, and senses of community and kinship to the filmmakers, critics, and participants involved. In the face of the state's persistent attempts to promote a unified national identity, the XSCREEN underground in Cologne pushed up into both public spaces and private ones. It was a total, though certainly not complete, project of reimagining how to spend time together and how to share space with one another.