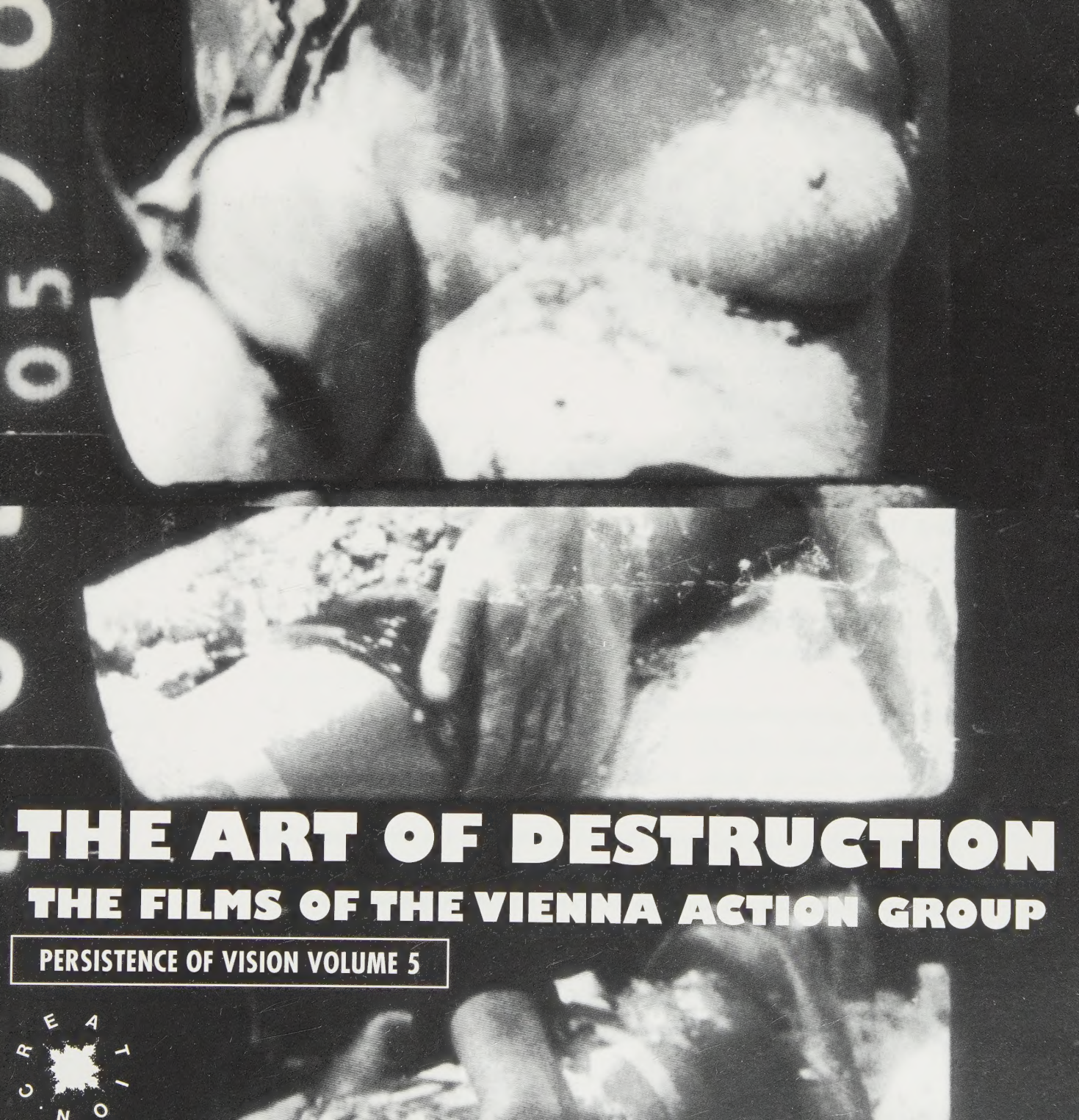


THE ART OF DESTRUCTION

**THE FILMS OF THE
VIENNA ACTION GROUP**

PERSISTENCE OF VISION VOLUME 5



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Credits:

THE ART OF DESTRUCTION

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*an 80-year-old grandmother is tied to an easy chair 13 m away from
the lens of a film projector*

*an experimental film (16 mm) prepared with ddt e605 blue vitriol
poisoned wheat and fly agaric powder is projected on to the wrinkled
old hag*

*the old grandmother passes away in the poisoned flickering of the
experimental film*

—Otto Muehl, Action Script XXVIII (1964)

ONE THE ORIGINS OF THE VIENNA ACTION GROUP

The Vienna Action Group formed the most provocative, insurgent and challenging of all the worldwide art movements of the 1960s. Their actions – undertaken mainly in improvised cellar spaces and in the streets of Vienna, rather than in art museums or galleries – exacted a profound upheaval in the way in which art was conceived and assembled. Using their own bodies and those of friends or dead animals, the Action Group undertook a series of experiments – both autonomously and often in loose collaboration – that disassembled the human body and its acts into compacted gestures of blood, semen and meat. The Action Group were reviled in Vienna (as, in many ways, they still are) for transforming that city into a slaughterhouse laboratory of the extremities and sensorial capacities of the human body. Although several of the Action Group conceived of their art works as forming sustained sequences, extending over years or even an entire lifetime, all of those acts were performed as unique events: vanishing as their rush of provocation and intensive concentration burned out. The films of the Vienna Action Group – made both by the group themselves, and by filmmaker collaborators or professional technicians – form the essential residue, debris and evidence of their

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work. Although their projects also generated photographic series, drawings and paintings, film is the sensitized medium – as unique, manipulable, and ferocious in its impact as the corporeal material upon which the Action Group worked – that allied itself most intimately to their experiments.

The four principal figures who made up the Vienna Action Group were Otto Muehl, Hermann Nitsch, Günter Brus and Rudolf Schwarzkogler. This book will focus on the work of those four artists, though a number of other artists and writers – such as Peter Weibel, now director of the ZKM digital media centre in Karlsruhe, and Valie Export, whose experiments were seminal to the development of feminist art practice – shared and participated with the obsessions and preoccupations of those four artists. All of them, except for Schwarzkogler (who had reasons not to work in film which themselves reveal the power of the film image in performance), worked extensively in film. In the films of the Vienna Action Group, the image does not document the action: it dissects it, seizes material from it, and launches itself from the action in order to create an autonomous film work that holds and even aggravates the provocation or obscenity of that action. Many actions were also created explicitly to be filmed. The filmmakers associated with the Action Group – in particular, Kurt Kren and Ernst Schmidt Jr – were not professional filmmakers in the conventional sense (in Vienna, Kren worked in a bank and Schmidt Jr as an insurance agent); their contact with the Action Group precipitated them into a committed, permanent filmmaking which severed their capacity to hold jobs in Austrian society, although their films rarely produced any income and both lived the final decades of their lives in poverty. Both had been experimental filmmakers prior to their mid-1960s collaboration with the Action Group (and, in Kren's case, had already achieved notoriety

for previous films), working in 8mm or 16mm film, and incorporating radical and destructive strategies upon the matter of the film celluloid which doubled the Action Group's assaults and demands on the human body.

The 1960s was the twentieth century's pre-eminent decade of explosive combustion and creative exhilaration, encompassing collective refusals of society and warfare (especially in the worldwide opposition to the Vietnam War), wholesale reformulations of sex and its imageries (with the ascendance of the pornographic film industry, alongside art forms which projected and incited the sexual freedom of young, dissident populations), and also a deep charge of aberrance, disturbance and sensory violence which accompanied such transformations. The work of the Vienna Action Group carried the marks of all three of those transformations: social refusal, sexual upheaval, and perverse cruelty. At the same time, their work was undertaken in the most entrenchedly reactionary country in Europe, and one whose own aberrance had produced both psychoanalysis and aggressive fascism (as Brus often emphasized, it was the country which had formed and launched Adolf Hitler); Vienna itself was unprepared for the provocations and outrages which the Action Group inflicted upon it, and responded with severe jail terms, heavy fines, and a virulent media frenzy which would cause all four of the Vienna Action Group to exit Vienna, in different ways, by the end of the 1960s.

In many ways, Vienna was still a fascist city in the 1960s. Its population, gathered in their hundreds of thousands on the Heldenplatz, had eagerly acclaimed Hitler when he appeared on the balcony of the former imperial palace to announce the annexation of Austria to Nazi Germany in April 1938. (Hitler had spent six years living in Vienna in the 1900s and 1910s, working as a menial cleaner

at the Westbahnhof railway station and then living rough, after being refused admission as a painting student to the city's art academy). Much of the bureaucracy of the Nazi regime had its axis in Vienna: the Austrian-born Adolf Eichmann had overseen preparations for the Final Solution from his office in the Prinz-Eugen-Strasse, alongside the Belvedere palace gardens. The population and governmental structures of Vienna had never been 're-educated' and 'de-nazified' in the comprehensive way in which those of Germany had been (largely because the British, French, American and Soviet occupiers of Vienna had been too preoccupied in haggling over their contested prize in the postwar years); many of the power structures and social attitudes put in place by the Nazis remained intact in Vienna, twenty years after the war, along with their instigators. The Vienna Action Group had different experiences and memories of the war, but all were seared by it in ways that became transmitted into their actions: Muehl had been just old enough to be conscripted to fight in the war, and had witnessed massacres of his comrades; as a child, Nitsch had seen the large-scale destruction and ruination of Vienna by firebombing, in the last period of the war; and Schwarzkogler's father had committed suicide at the Battle of Stalingrad after having his legs blown off in combat. The Vienna Action Group were the deviant children of European fascism.

The 1960s saw a vast reconsideration or refusal of religion in Europe, even in Austria; the investigations of Eastern religions, of shamanism, of buddhism, and of atheistic and nihilistic alliances all found their mark in the art and revolt of 1960s Vienna. Sex alone constituted a new religion in the 1960s. In Vienna, those upheavals temporarily unsettled the mystical catholicism that had been rooted there since the time when (as the city's inhabitants saw it) God himself had intervened to repel the islamic invaders from Turkey who

had besieged and partially destroyed the city in 1683. Religion became a primary target for the Vienna Action Group, and Nitsch's blood orgies and exhaustive rituals, with their crucified human and animal bodies (including Nitsch himself), outraged the city's bourgeois and media powers. Nitsch's religious obsession operated at a destructive tangent to catholicism, incorporating elements from many Eastern religions and catalysing itself with an element of social outrage and direct provocation that reflected the revolutionary furore of the time. Nitsch's actions, despite their religious inflections, could mutate wildly into blood-sodden, cacophonous chaos that was the antithesis of catholicism (Nitsch was prepared also to stage his actions within the context of satanic events). And finally, in his ultimately self-directed actions, Nitsch himself was God. By contrast, Otto Muehl had a more caustic and wryly dismissive approach to religion, while Schwarzkogler immersed himself assiduously in studies of Eastern religions as part of the intricate process of self-negation that would lead to his suicide.

In retrospect, the Vienna Action Group pursued the most extreme and creatively exacting performance art of the 1960s, using the urban space of Vienna as the arena for many of their experiments; forty years on, their work has become lauded, institutionally collected and revered, and governmentally recognised in Austria (albeit ambivalently). But in the 1960s, the Vienna Action Group were criminals. Their projects led directly to their being thrown into prison for periods of weeks and months at a time, and subjected to heavy fines which (as income-less performance artists) they were often unable to pay; more lengthy periods of penal incarceration were in prospect for the Action Group at the time of their disintegration at the end of the 1960s. The film *Action Vienna Walk*, shot by Muehl of Brus' street-action and arrest in 1965, demonstrated the immediacy and

pervasiveness of the suppression under which the Action Group habitually worked. After an event in 1968 in which Brus defecated before a large public audience and then masturbated while singing the Austrian national anthem, both the Austrian media and judicial systems focused their attention on obliterating him and the rest of the Action Group; both Brus and Nitsch fled Austria into exile (Brus stayed away for many years), while the project which Otto Muehl now conceived as the extension of his 1960s performances and films – the establishment of an egalitarian commune in which property was outlawed and sex was always freely available, especially for Muehl himself – would eventually lead him to a further period of imprisonment in Austria, for sexual crimes, from 1991 to 1997. The work of the Vienna Action Group, however it may be rehabilitated or banalized, still insurges against passification and institutionalisation. In the 1960s, that work was explicitly conceived and socially perceived as the work of art-criminals, and that criminal charge endures.

The performances and films of the Vienna Action Group and their collaborators exerted a vast and worldwide impact, both during the period in which they were undertaken and right through to the contemporary moment – in performance art and body art, in experimental filmmaking, in choreography, and in digital art which explores the evanescence and vanishing of the body and its images. The depth of that impact has been demonstrated in recent years by such events as the *Out of Actions* performance-art exhibition, which prominently focused on the work of the Action Group and was shown at major art venues in the United States, Japan and Europe in 1998-9; the exhibition of Muehl's work at the Louvre in Paris in 2001-2; and the large-scale action staged by Nitsch at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London in 2002. In terms of resistance to globalisation and

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corporatism, and to their dissolution of individual and corporeal identity, the acts of the Vienna Action Group also offer seminal images of a ferocious and uncompromised resistance and reinvention. The films of the Vienna Action Group provide the essential, aberrant traces of those actions and anti-social projects, and this book will explore those films in close conjunction with the preoccupations of the artists and the lasting inspiration of their work.



TWO OTTO MUEHL

Otto Muehl, the oldest of the Vienna Action Group artists and in many ways their driving instigator, was born in 1925 in Grodnau, in the rural Burgenland area to the south-east of Vienna. He was conscripted into Hitler's army in the final period of the Second World War, when casualties were vast on the disintegrating German fronts: he fought in numerous last-ditch battles across Europe and was awarded the Iron Cross. After the war, Muehl attended university and received training to practice as a therapist for disturbed and handicapped children in Vienna. In the early 1960s, he met the other three Action Group artists (all of whom were at least a decade younger than him), each in different circumstances, and his active encouragement and participation in their work allowed the four artists to coalesce as a loose – often volatile – grouping, which at various times they called the 'Institute for Direct Art' and the 'Vienna Action Group'. Muehl also provided the physical space for many of the performances of the Action Group, in the emptied cellars below the successive apartment blocks he lived in. Especially with Günter Brus, Muehl served as an advisor and guide: a relentless provoker of ever-greater extremity in performance. Muehl was always conscious of the

way in which film was essential to his performance work (just as it would have a seminal role in his future experiments with communal living); although he initially saw film primarily as a way of documenting the work of the Action Group, it was Muehl who invited the experimental filmmakers Kurt Kren and Ernst . Jr to bring their own disruptive preoccupations to bear on the representation of his performance work and that of Brus.

Muehl moved from painting into the arena of performance art at the beginning of the 1960s, though he would intermittently continue painting and making collages throughout the decade. Many of his early actions of 1964-6 – such as *Mama And Papa*, *Leda And The Swan*, *O Christmas Tree* and *Bodybuilding* – were staged in enclosed spaces in Vienna, especially his own cellar in the Perinetgasse alley, before small invited audiences. Muehl and his naked collaborators (younger women and men) amassed vast quantities of materials for each performance – feathers, eggs and other foodstuffs, paint, blood and milk – which were unleashed in the exactly-choreographed performances: the sexual organs of the participants were manipulated, opened-up, crammed with materials or isolated from the rest of their bodies in the disciplined frenzy of entangled figures. Muehl's role in his actions was always that of the agent of a gleeful or harsh incitation of his participants into a collective sexual self-testing: an exploratory theory of headlong neural excess, probed entirely by corporeal means. His performances were often broken-up by the police and the participants abruptly expelled from the cellar-spaces. Muehl's work remained infamous only in Vienna until the mid-1960s; but by 1966, his growing notoriety and that of the other Action Group artists began to lead to invitations to perform outside Vienna, in front of larger, public audiences, most prominently at the international 'Destruction in Art Symposium' in





London in September of that year.

Throughout the early years of his performance work, Muehl wrote many scripts for his actions and also manifestoes of denunciation aimed at the repressive, still-fascistic society that he saw as impeding his work. Muehl's manifestoes are a concoction of outright provocation, delirious fantasy and deadly-serious admonition. In his *Zock* manifesto of 1967, Muehl formulated a worldview of exclusion and eradication that resonates with Antonin Artaud's *I Hate And Renounce As A Coward* texts of twenty years earlier, and with previous projects to decimate society, by writers such as Sade and Lautréamont, all of them pitched between an insanely-furious 'délire de revendication' of individual self-imposition on the world, and a pure and active re-conception of terminally accursed societies. In his *Zock* manifesto, Muehl demands that sexual acts must now always take place between individuals of different skin colours, to engender a detonation of national and racial boundaries. He advocates a generalized chaos of incessant, revolutionary destruction. With an extreme rigour evocative of Pol Pot's visions of the same period for the future of Year-Zero Cambodia, Muehl demands the eradication of all books, languages, art works, music and factories; the famines that will result from these systematic destructions are to be welcomed (human bodies can then ingest one another in a lethal sexual pandemonium, with the weakest being consumed first). Muehl also warmly advocates incest, filmed orgies and all kinds of bestiality, and attempts to eradicate the distinction between human and animal life; however, he demands the extermination of all 'useless' animals, together with the destruction of forests and cities. But the core of Muehl's fury is aimed at the family and its structure; the overriding aim of his future performances – as they veered increasingly away from art towards the instigation of



Umbilical Chord –
Representation Of A
Birth (Action 7, 1964).
Photo © Sammlung
Hummel, Wien/MAK



Piss-Action (1968)

large-scale anti-social communities – became the denunciation of the family and the sexual couple.

In the final years of the 1960s, Muehl and his group of young collaborators made appearances at numerous art festivals, mainly in Germany. After 1968 and his participation in the collaborative *Art And Revolution* event in Vienna (at which Brus' actions, in particular, sparked a vast media tirade of vitriol and the prospect of increasingly lengthy penal incarcerations for the Action Group), it became almost impossible for Muehl to perform in Austria; he was imprisoned for a month following the performance. His final performances became more extreme, almost always involving the decapitation of animals or birds – in *O Sensibility*, from 1970 (one of Muehl's very last public performances), the blood-spurting neck of a decapitated goose was then used to penetrate the vagina of one of Muehl's willing young collaborators. Muehl would occasionally improvise public defecations, as happened in Amsterdam in 1970 in response to an audience disruption of his performance action. Muehl was often now performing in large halls in front of several hundred curious spectators, rather than the small handfuls of friends who had witnessed his mid-1960s actions. Explicit sexual acts became an integral part of Muehl's performances – but these were acts notably executed with far greater violence and serrated provocation than those staged during the same period by experimental, pacifistic theatre companies such as Julian Beck's Living Theatre. By the end of 1970, in the face of audience hostility or incomprehension, police threats, and the sense of having exhausted all he could achieve in the public arena, Muehl severed contact with the world of performance art.

Muehl had been known in Vienna as an intensely charismatic figure who could effortlessly gather acolytes around him, especially

young women and men. Over the next few years, in his home region of the Burgenland, he established the Friedrichshof commune, on flat farmland to the south-east of Vienna, close to the border with Hungary. Muehl and his followers built large living pavilions with a huge clocktower, built a wall around the area, and began a rigorous experiment in creating a hierarchy-free community. At its height, the commune had six hundred participants, with satellite communes in numerous other European cities. In his 1974 film *Sweet Movie*, the Yugoslavian filmmaker Dusan Makavejev included sequences showing Muehl and members of his commune in Paris. The family and the sexual couple were outlawed at Friedrichshof: above all, sex was freely and very frequently available, although women generally chose their partners on criteria of sexual performance (no homosexual sex was allowed). Despite the commune's intended obliteration of hierarchy, Muehl was always in a position of supreme power, and always the centre of sexual attention. In a documentary film made in 1999 by Madonna Benjamin, *Slaves In Paradise*, on the then-defunct Friedrichshof commune, Muehl remembered that in terms of the sheer number of sexual acts he had committed daily at Friedrichshof, 'I was an unbeatable olympic champion'. Every evening, the participants staged therapeutic, sexually-charged performances, directed by Muehl himself; these performances, along with all of the other activities of the commune from its very origins, were scrupulously filmed and videoed. By the mid-1980s, the commune had partially broken its isolation and begun to generate income for itself by social subversion; commune members took lucrative banking and real-estate jobs in international finance-centres, amassing vast sums of money to return to Muehl at Friedrichshof.

As time went on, Muehl's commune became increasingly hierarchical and authoritarian (it even developed a system of



Muehl as subversive film-maker

numerical ranking, in which Muehl – like Pol Pot – was Number One); the power wielded by Muehl remained relatively benign, but when the first generation of children born in the commune reached the approximate age at which Muehl could demand sex with them (the age of consent in Austria is fourteen), jealousies and recrimination gathered. At the same time, media frenzies gradually grew up around the commune, particularly after the death in 1990 of the Austrian Socialist political leader Bruno Kreisky, whom Muehl had viewed as a great protector of his commune. In June 1991, Muehl was arrested at Friedrichshof for sexual and drug offences, and imprisoned without parole (for much of the time in the maximum-security Krems prison, to the north-west of Vienna) until December 1997; without him, Friedrichshof collapsed and became largely depopulated, though the buildings remained the property of the commune. Muehl spent his six years in prison crayoning vivid sexual images and writing. On his release, in failing health and over seventy years of age, he chose exile rather than a return to Friedrichshof, and moved with his hard-core of followers to a large and isolated villa, at Moncarapacho on the southern coast of Portugal, where he immediately reinstigated the intensive sexual and therapeutic regime he had created at Friedrichshof nearly thirty years earlier.



THREE GÜNTER BRUS

Günter Brus' reputation has become that of the most conceptually advanced and dangerously provocative of the Vienna Action Group – always at the storm's eye in the events that generated the Group's criminal notoriety – but he was also the artist who most comprehensively distanced himself in later years from their outrages, and went on to produce a different kind of art. Brus was born in the village of Ardning in the Styrian region of Austria in 1938, and was certainly the participant of the Action Group least damaged by the impact of the Second World War. However, Brus was conscripted into the Austrian army as a young man, and proved to be an unruly and disruptive soldier whom his superiors despised and punished. For Brus, Hitler's fascism was still deeply embedded in every element of Austrian life, tenaciously maintained by its inhabitants. In the 1990s, Brus recalled: 'At the start of my career in Austria, this country had not been "abandoned by God", but by the rest of the world. Nowhere else in Europe, except in the Eastern Bloc and in Franco's Spain, were young artists confronted with such regressive and repressive conditions... Austria not only produced the man whose foundry gave rise to National Socialism, but it also put the tin-pot lid on top of his creation.'¹

1. Brus, in *Limite du Visible: Günter Brus*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1993, p.102-3 (translated from the French)

Brus had moved to Vienna by 1957, initially studying at the Academy of Applied Arts and beginning to make large-scale gestural paintings. He met Otto Muehl in 1960 at an art exhibition at which Muehl was impressed by Brus' outspoken denunciation of the work on show; Brus also challenged and criticized Muehl's own early paintings, propelling him into his action work just as Muehl's incitations helped to spark Brus' performances. Over the next years, Brus also met and began to collaborate with Nitsch and Schwarzkogler. Though habitually shy and polite, Brus was transformed into fury by the mundanity of contemporary art and by the restrictive, stultified atmosphere of early-1960s Vienna; he worked in an incessant nervous frenzy on developing his own performances. For Brus, the origins of all art emerged from its proximity to anti-social insanity and from a painstaking interrogation of language. In a 1960 diary entry, he wrote: 'Language has lost itself. It can still be found in moanings and spittings, screams and gulps – language has become the place of experimentation for art – where both art and language have died simultaneously, along with everything else, even the actions of a madman (or almost). From expression to pressure and from there to death.'² That negative excavation of language had to be undertaken corporeally, through the intervention of a body which provoked its spectators so intensively – with an insurgent vocabulary of excrement, blood, urine, razorcuts and cries – that they were forced to collaborate on that all-encompassing reformulation of language.

Brus staged many of his early performances in Muehl's cellar; he worked alone, or occasionally with his wife Anni and their baby daughter. Brus' meticulously-staged actions revealed his body (often painted completely white, including his suits and the entire surrounding room and its objects), immediately alongside or directly

2. *ibid*, p.95



Brus and daughter

Günter Brus, *Ana* (1964)

on a bed of large nails, forks, scissors and axes; Brus' mouth contorted or cried, immersed in a coagulated medium of paint and other adhesive substances. Anni Brus appeared naked, the layers of nails juxtaposed in threatening proximity to her vagina. In his first action, *Ana*, from 1964, filmed by Kurt Kren in Muehl's cellar, Brus – painted white and entirely wrapped in bandages – gradually convulsed across the space, shredding the bandages behind him as a corporeal debris. The atmosphere during the action was highly charged: Muehl, Kren and two photographers documenting the action all became involved in heated disputes with one another. Brus went on to stage further

enclosed actions, which he titled 'self-mutilations', graded according to the degree of insanity they projected; for these performances, he inscribed a jagged vertical line down the front of his white-painted body, from his skull to his boots. But the first major, external provocation of Brus' work took place with his *Action Vienna Walk* of 5 July 1965, in which he emerged – painted in the same way as his cellar-bound actions – from a car parked directly in front of the palace balcony from which Hitler had announced the incorporation of Austria into Nazi Germany (before a square packed with ecstatic crowds) in 1938. Brus intended to walk from there to the city's main square, the Stephansplatz. Filmed and photographed as he walked, in front of awestruck crowds, Brus took the road that cut through the imperial palace, emerging into the Michaelerplatz square and then continuing along the Habsburgergasse alley, before being arrested by a policeman in the Stallburggasse, taken to the nearest police-station (where he was fined) and then driven away. The action had lasted only a few minutes.

Brus developed his performances over the next three years, incorporating razorcuts into his flesh and the drinking of his own urine into the volatile vocabulary of his work. His determination to conduct a raw, creative anatomization of his own body, while refusing social suppressions and instigating a direct art form, resulted in ever-greater provocation. A media frenzy in the Viennese press accumulated with the reports of his successive performances. On 7 June 1968, he took part in the *Art And Revolution* collaborative event – with Muehl, Peter Weibel and several writers loosely associated with the Action Group – in the main lecture hall at the University of Vienna. The action (filmed in part by Ernst Schmidt Jr) would generate the most extreme outrage of any of the Group's public appearances in Vienna. The participants performed simultaneously;



Above (pissing) and below (shitting): Sheer Madness (1968)



3. *ibid.*, p.98

Body Analysis 1 (1969,
filmed by Merseburger)

while Muehl vigorously flagellated a screaming but willing victim, Brus began his own action. Before several hundred spectators, he undressed completely, incised his chest with a razor, urinated into a cup and drank it, then placed a finger into his throat to make himself vomit; he then lengthily defecated while squatting on a table – Brus later commented: ‘the anus is the root of all religions’³ – and rubbed the excrement over his body; he then reclined on his side, coated in excrement, and sang the Austrian national anthem. Brus maintained that *Art And Revolution* had intended to exert a positive and cathartic impact in Austria – he believed that his action had so utterly bewildered and factionalized the extremist left-wing and right-wing movements in the country that they were then unable to pursue acts of terrorism (thereby saving Austria from the traumas that West Germany would suffer in the following decade with the Baader-Meinhof terrorist group).

However, the Austrian judiciary and media were less convinced of Brus’ mission in performing *Art And Revolution*. Many press articles demanded his permanent incarceration and labelled him ‘Public Enemy Number One’ (even the Viennese art critics denounced Brus for allegedly using performance strategies that were themselves fascistic and manipulative); he was arrested, subjected to psychiatric testing and sentenced to six months’ imprisonment, but then accidentally released – thereby giving him the opportunity to flee Vienna and head for exile in Berlin, where friends arranged an apartment for him. Other Viennese artists and writers were leaving for Berlin during that period; the writer Oswald Wiener (who also took part in the *Art And Revolution* event) opened a restaurant called ‘Exile’ in the city’s Kreuzberg district of squatters, radical protesters and Turkish immigrants, and the venue served as a base for Brus’ activities over his decade in Berlin; after his flight from Austria, Brus

considered himself as existing in a permanent state of exile, wherever he travelled. He was never granted a West German residence permit and lived there illegally. However, because of West Berlin's strange geographical isolation within Communist East Germany, the city remained a relatively unpoliced haven for conscription-dodgers, criminals and professional sexual deviants from all over Europe, and Brus was never expelled.

Brus undertook his last public performance, *Action Stress Test*, in Munich on 17 June 1970, in a performance-art space, in front of a small and intensely-concentrated audience. Brus appeared in total isolation. With his head clumsily shaven and naked apart from a set of men's underpants and women's stockings (which he cut apart with scissors), Brus undertook a series of self-lacerating gestures while kneeling on a white cloth. The gestures were interspersed with cries, grimaces and sudden sideways springing movements. Each punctuation of scream and gesture marked a breaking-point zone of corporeal disintegration or of insanity in Brus' self-testing. He slit open one of his thighs, urinated on the wound, then collected the rest of his urine in a glass and drank it. He spread-eagled himself face-down on the ground, then stood partly upright, turned away from the audience, and cut the flesh over his skull so that a thick line of blood ran down the entirety of the back of his body. After a further set of brief and curtailed gestures and cries, Brus writhed screaming on the ground, then abruptly relaxed, and left the room smiling wryly. The performance – Brus' most extreme and demanding action – had lasted for thirty minutes.

In the early stages of his exile in Berlin, Brus moved his activities comprehensively into drawing and writing, producing illustrated books which retained and expanded many of the obsessions and strategies of his performance actions, but placed them



Drawing by Günter Brus

firmly within a more guarded, internal framework. Brus' books formed delicate, stormy excavations of his inner corporeal landscapes, mixing image and poetic text like those of Artaud (whose work Brus became aware of only after the period of his actions). He always rejected the idea that the persecution of his actions in Vienna had led him to abandon them; rather, he had reached the terminal point of that phase of his work, beyond which self-mutilation would have shifted entirely into the domain of insanity or suicide. His published books and his collaborations with the Austrian painter Arnulf Rainer (whose work, predating that of the Action Group, had exerted a particular influence on Brus and Schwarzkogler) gradually generated an international art-world following at variance with his previous reputation; his wife Anni was able to intercede with the Austrian Chancellor for his still-active sentence to be commuted to a fine, and Brus returned to Austria in 1979 (though to the city of Graz, in his home region, rather than to Vienna). Brus continued to work on an exploratory language formed of drawings, the body, exile and digital technology. He commented: 'So the former actionist now transforms himself into a contemporary digital Gauguin'.⁴

4. *ibid*, p.115



FOUR HERMANN NITSCH

In many ways, Hermann Nitsch's performance actions – with their pinioned bodies and surfaces drenched in blood, organs and excrement – form the most powerful and vivid imageries of the Vienna Action Group's work. Although Nitsch lacked the engagement with experimental cinema that generated such collaborations of those of Muehl with Kren, preferring instead a more stilted documentation of his actions, it was Nitsch's work that forged the pre-eminent iconography of the Action Group, and which incited American underground filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas to film his actions. Nitsch was born in Vienna in 1938 and grew up there, receiving the religious upbringing which imbued almost all Austrian children of his generation with an obsessional engagement with the crucifixion and suffering of Christ, and the political upbringing in which the radio-disseminated voice of Hitler (who annexed Austria in the year of Nitsch's birth) became the pre-eminent father's voice which supplanted those of all other fathers; as a small child, Nitsch witnessed the devastation by wartime bombing of Vienna: entire areas of the city were decimated and turned into bomb-cratered wildernesses, and the cathedral was partially destroyed. Nitsch has often spoken of how this devastation profoundly attracted

and haunted him (in exactly the same way that artists of his generation in Tokyo experienced, as children, the wholesale destruction of their own city), and propelled him into an intense engagement with violently meshing together imageries of life and death. At the war's conclusion, Vienna's desperate and uprooted inhabitants were temporarily subjugated to their new – American, British, French and Soviet – rulers, until Austria finally regained its independent status in 1955.

Nitsch formulated his life's work at an early age, in 1957, when he conceived the idea of a six-day, non-stop exhaustive spectacle of blood, carnage, alcohol, catharsis and celebration; at the same time, he began to formulate the theoretical foundations of his *Orgies Mysteries Theatre* project. To a large extent, the core of Nitsch's work appeared fully-formed at that moment and never developed any further – forty-five years later, he would assert that there is no such thing as progressive innovation in art: only the ever-deepening excavation and revelation of a small number of primordial and essential obsessions.⁵ At that time, at the age of nineteen, Nitsch was a student at the School of Graphic Arts in Vienna, mainly engaged in painting crucifixion scenes. But his crucifixions were no longer entirely Christian in conception – they would become increasingly layered over by preoccupations with Far Eastern and Greek mythologies, psychoanalysis, gnostic and nihilistic ideas, combined with the sheer anti-social fury and exultance of the following decade's revolutionary movements; finally, it was Nitsch himself who would be firmly placed at the deific and corporeal epicentre of his Theatre, emanating his philosophy to his numerous disciples and acolytes. Although he temporarily abandoned painting at the end of the 1950s to further his ideas of a theatre of bloodshed and cathartic slaughter, Nitsch had returned to painting by 1960 and was inscribing his

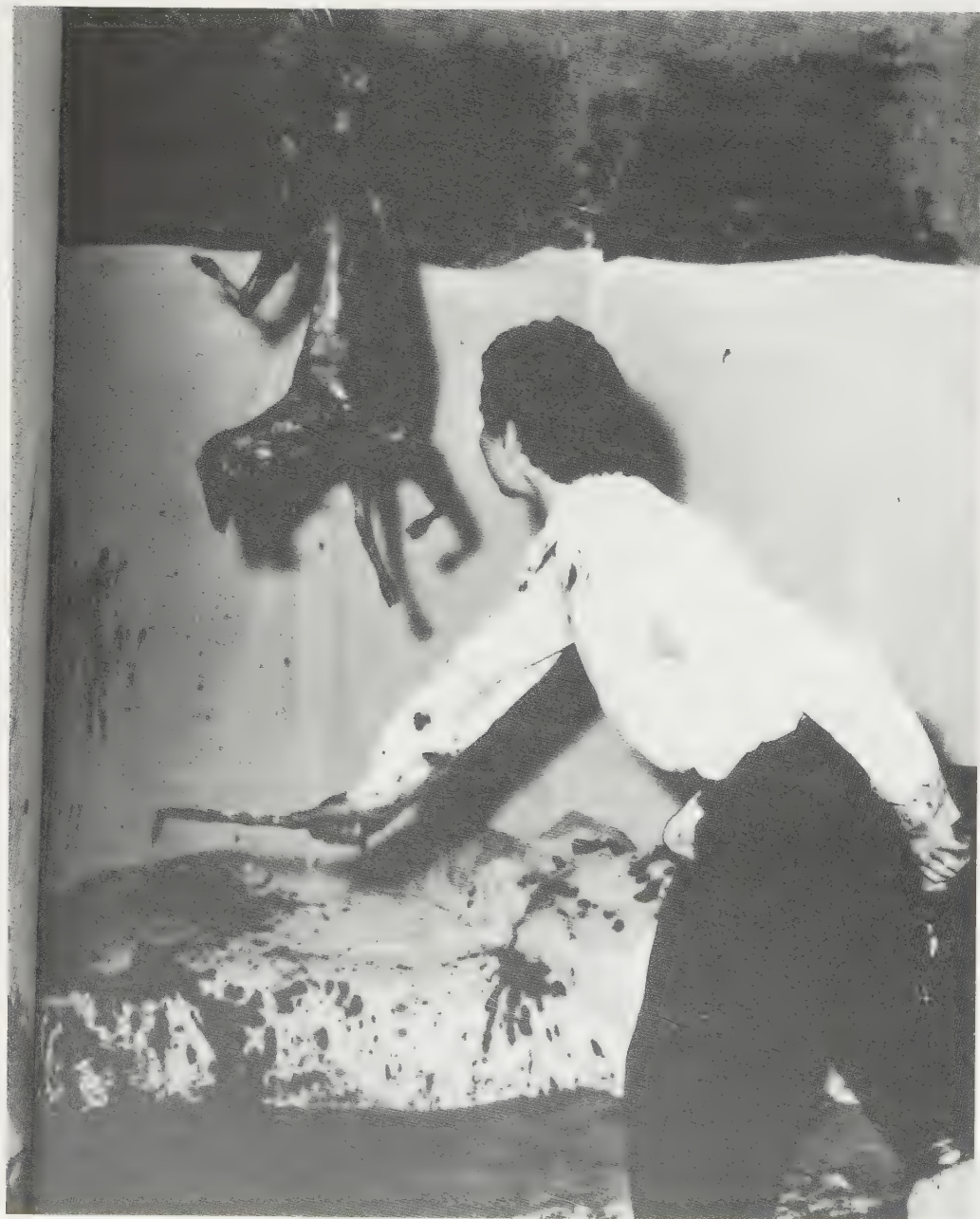
5. Nitsch, interviewed by Hayley Newman, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 19 April 2002



Nitsch with slaughtered lamb

theories and obsessions in text around the edge of his painted images. In that period, he also met Muehl and Schwarzkogler, both of whom would actively participate in the performance actions which emerged from the collision of Nitsch's dual engagements with gestural painting and theatre.

As with those of Brus, many of Nitsch's early performance actions – which he meticulously numbered, so that after forty years, they would exceed one hundred – were staged in the cellar of Muehl's apartment block. At first, they were executed with a degree of wry spontaneity (in the first film of a Nitsch action, shot in silent, black-and-white film in 1962 by Bert Gruber, Nitsch is seen laughing and mischievously looking at the film camera as he works), but he rapidly developed a rigorous, ritualistic vocabulary and solemnity for his actions, exacerbated by the playing of music – ideally, by an orchestra present at the spectacle – at extremely loud volume. Nitsch's actions staged the simulated crucifixion of living human bodies or the actual crucifixion of slaughtered lambs: vast quantities of blood and other liquids were poured over the participants' sexual organs and wounds; the animal's meat and intestines were assaulted, trampled-upon, placed over and into penises and vaginas. The cumulative impact of Nitsch's spectacles – often extending over many hours – was sensorially harsh, setting perception into radical upheaval, with cathartic or purifying intentions. One sequence of Nitsch's actions staged 'penis rinsings', in which the exposed penises of his participants (including Schwarzkogler) were saturated in blood and dense mixings of fluids, then washed clean with warm water. Throughout the period of his actions in Vienna, Nitsch produced manifestoes and publications – beginning with the *Blood Organ* collaboration of 1962 with Muehl – to justify and explicate his intentions. But the inhabitants of Vienna viewed Nitsch – along with



Hermann Nitsch, 1963
Action



Hermann Nitsch, 1966
Action

the other Action Group artists – as a deviant terrorist; photographs from one of his arrests, in 1963, showed him being hauled out of Muehl's cellar by the police in mid-action and then standing provocatively in the street, smiling and caked in blood from head to foot.

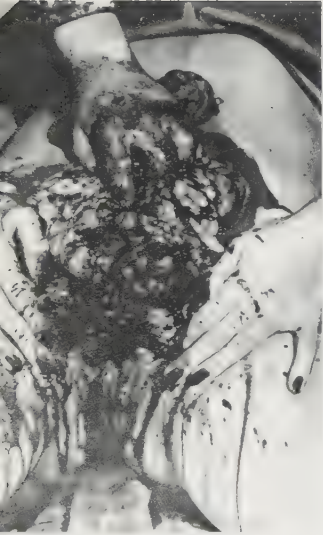
More rapidly than those of the other Action Group artists, Nitsch's performances began to gain an international notoriety. His cellar-bound actions attracted huge crowds, and he also began to perform in large gallery spaces. With Brus and Muehl, he took part in the 'Destruction in Art Symposium' in London in 1966; although Nitsch's action was interrupted by the intervention of the police, it generated a great success and he began to receive further invitations to perform outside Austria. His actions grew ever-vaster in scale, incorporating choirs of screaming voices and large numbers of ritualistic participants surrounding Nitsch's own gestures of evisceration. Although Nitsch was incarcerated on one occasion by the Viennese police, it was for a sentence of only fourteen days. In the summer of 1967, the Austrian national television station filmed Nitsch staging a crucifixion performance undertaken specially for transmission to the Austrian people; the film – unique among the films of the Vienna Action Group as the only one shot and lit by a professional film-crew, using tracking shots and zooms as Nitsch cuts apertures into the flesh of a lamb, which is flayed and then savagely beaten with a hammer – was completed, but not transmitted. Together with the increasingly caustic media climate angled at the Action Group, the banning of the film of Nitsch's performance by the director of the television station (analogous to the censorship of Artaud's final work, the radio broadcast *To Have Done With The Judgement Of God*, by the director of the radio station that had commissioned it) drove Nitsch into a fury, and precipitated his



Hermann Nitsch, 1968 Action

decision to leave Vienna later that year to live in Munich.

During his exile from Austria, Nitsch's celebrity escalated. He began to make intermittent visits to the United States, where his many admirers included Yoko Ono, Julian Beck of the Living Theatre, and the filmmakers Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas. Brakhage had



Hermann Nitsch, 1969
Action

been the first American filmmaker to film one of Nitsch's performances, in December 1965 (he incorporated the fragments into his vast film project *The Songs*, which was shown internationally and increased Nitsch's renown). Jonas Mekas, who founded the New York Anthology Film Archives and had invented the entire context for experimental film-art in New York, welcomed Nitsch and also shot films of his American performances in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including one at the New York Mercer Art Kitchen in 1972 which formed a launching-point for Nitsch's extended actions of subsequent years; Mekas also included footage of Nitsch shot during a visit to Austria in his 1972 film *Reminiscences Of A Journey To Lithuania*. The prominent American filmmaker Jud Yalkut also made a film of Nitsch's work, shot at the University of Cincinnati's Spring Arts Festival in 1968. From his base in Munich, Nitsch became increasingly immersed in the countercultural frenzy of American and cross-European opposition to the Vietnam war and towards oppressive political power; in 1969, he invited the terminally-depressed Schwarzkogler to join him there. In 1970, the legendary Surrealist photographer, Pierre Molinier (renowned in his native France for his outrageous, sexually-charged images) visited Munich and photographed a Nitsch performance; one of Nitsch's associates, Hanel Koeck, who had also appeared on film in the work of Kren and Muehl, befriended Molinier and began to visit him at his studio in Bordeaux, becoming the most intensive sexual and creative obsession of the final years of Molinier's life, prior to his suicide in 1976. Alongside the media furore his work still generated, Nitsch's public profile as an internationally-renowned artist grew; he began to stage numerous gallery exhibitions and (unique among the Action Group) to work as an art school professor.

Nitsch had been looking for a permanent home for his Orgies

Mysteries Theatre since its origins, and had always singled out a three-storey baroque castle near the village of Prinzendorf an der Zaya, close to the border with Slovakia in the Weinviertel region to the north of Vienna (on the opposite side of the city to Muehl's commune); Nitsch had visited the area, of vast vineyards and isolated villages, as a child. In 1971, his second wife Beate (who would be killed in a car crash in 1977) was able to buy the empty, semi-derelict castle, and it became the permanent centre of Nitsch's activities. Nitsch had always expressed his disgust for the forms of modern cities, and the large castle, with its extensive subterranean cellars, outbuildings, vineyards and grounds, enabled him to create his own world and to distance himself both from Vienna and from the contemporary, mediated environments he despised. Over the next twenty-five years, he worked to develop the scenario for the unique spectacle, originally conceived in 1957, that would be the ultimate realization of his *Orgies Mysteries Theatre*: with several hundred participants, he finally accomplished the event in 1998 with a triumphant performance (filmed in digital video) of bloodshed, screaming, sensory excess and drunkenness, running without a break over six days and nights.

Nitsch was the more vocal of the surviving Action Group artists to protest against Muehl's incarceration during the 1990s: while Brus preferred not to sign petitions demanding Muehl's liberation, Nitsch gave a speech at a prominent Vienna gallery in 1992 to denounce the fraudulent political imperatives which he saw as engineering Muehl's arrest.⁶ Muehl, however, viewed Nitsch's contemporary status with irony. Although he maintained his austere base at the Prinzendorf Castle, where he worked with a number of assistants on large-scale painting projects and supervised the castle's vineyards, Nitsch's life also increasingly became that of an

⁶ V. N.,
Felsen, *St. F. F. F.*
speech at the Galerie
Kunzinger, Vienna, 24
February 1992.

international art-market celebrity. Large retrospectives of his work were staged worldwide, while Nitsch continued to perform occasional large-scale actions, often with a nostalgic aura (including the action he staged at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London, in 2002, as part of a series celebrating performance art of the 1960s). In Vienna itself, however, his international fame remained enduringly tainted by the Action Group's reputation of criminality and outrage, and Nitsch continued to face attacks and gratuitous rebukes for his 'degenerate art' of the 1960s whenever he appeared on television or on discussion panels to discuss such weighty issues as 'the fate of man's soul'.



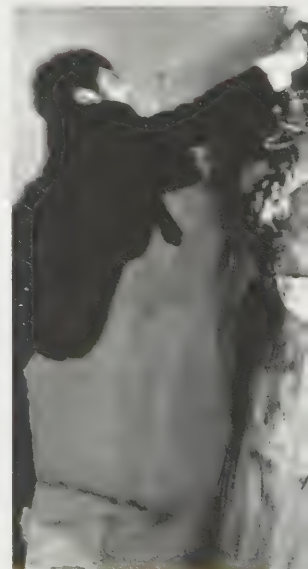
FIVE RUDOLF SCHWARZKOGLER

The only one of the Vienna Action Group not to be involved in making films of his performances, Rudolf Schwarzkogler was also separated from the other three artists in many other ways. His actions were undertaken as intricate private rituals of wounding and obsession, documented only in rigorously controlled photographic images; he performed his series of actions over a fairly short span of time before abandoning them completely (the antithesis of Nitsch's conception of his own performances as his life's-work); his life then dissolved in mystical preoccupations and exacting corporeal strategies of starvation, undertaken in Vienna during the period when the other Action Group artists were leaving the city behind; and his life ended in suicide precipitated by acute depression, at the age of twenty-nine. Schwarzkogler was the youngest of the Action Group, born in Vienna in the early period of the Second World War, in 1940; his father served as a doctor in the German army, fighting against Stalin's forces on the frozen Eastern Front, and shot himself at the Battle of Stalingrad on 13 January 1943 after having both his legs blown off in an explosion. Schwarzkogler then grew up as an orphan; he spent some time studying graphic design in Vienna before meeting Nitsch at the beginning of the 1960s, through his friend Heinz Cibulka (who would

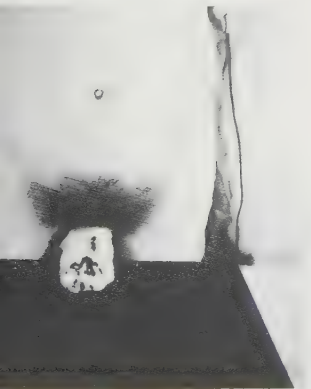
become a prominent model and photographer of the work of the Action Group artists).

Schwarzkogler spent the first half of the 1960s intensively formulating ideas for his own actions while collaborating in a subordinate capacity with the other Action Group artists. In particular, he served as a model for Nitsch's 'penis rinsing' actions of 1965, and helped to photograph Brus' *Action Vienna Walk* in July of the same year; he also took part in a number of Muehl's performances of that period. Schwarzkogler's concentrated series of actions demanded a high degree of uncompromised rigour in their formulation over an extended period of time, and he was the first of the Action Group to incorporate the writings of Artaud (among other theorists) into the conception of his work: the entire process of representation became subject to cancellation or negation in Schwarzkogler's actions, in order concurrently to highlight corporeal material in its processes of damage, sexual disintegration and vulnerability. Unlike Muehl or Nitsch, whose actions pivoted to some degree on the reactions of their spectators (in responses of outrage, anger or catharsis), Schwarzkogler conceived of actions whose direct sensorial impact would be confined to their participants, and then retrospectively disseminated to any audience solely through the medium of photographic images; during Schwarzkogler's lifetime, this approach meant that his work was almost completely unknown outside of the Action Group and their immediate associates.

Schwarzkogler's series of six actions was undertaken between February 1965 and the Spring of the following year; his own body took a prominent role in the actions, from the first one, *Wedding*, in which the bearded Schwarzkogler (wearing a suit and tie) manipulated numerous substances and threw buckets of paint over Brus' wife, wearing a wedding-dress, until the last (untitled) action, in which the



Wedding (1965)

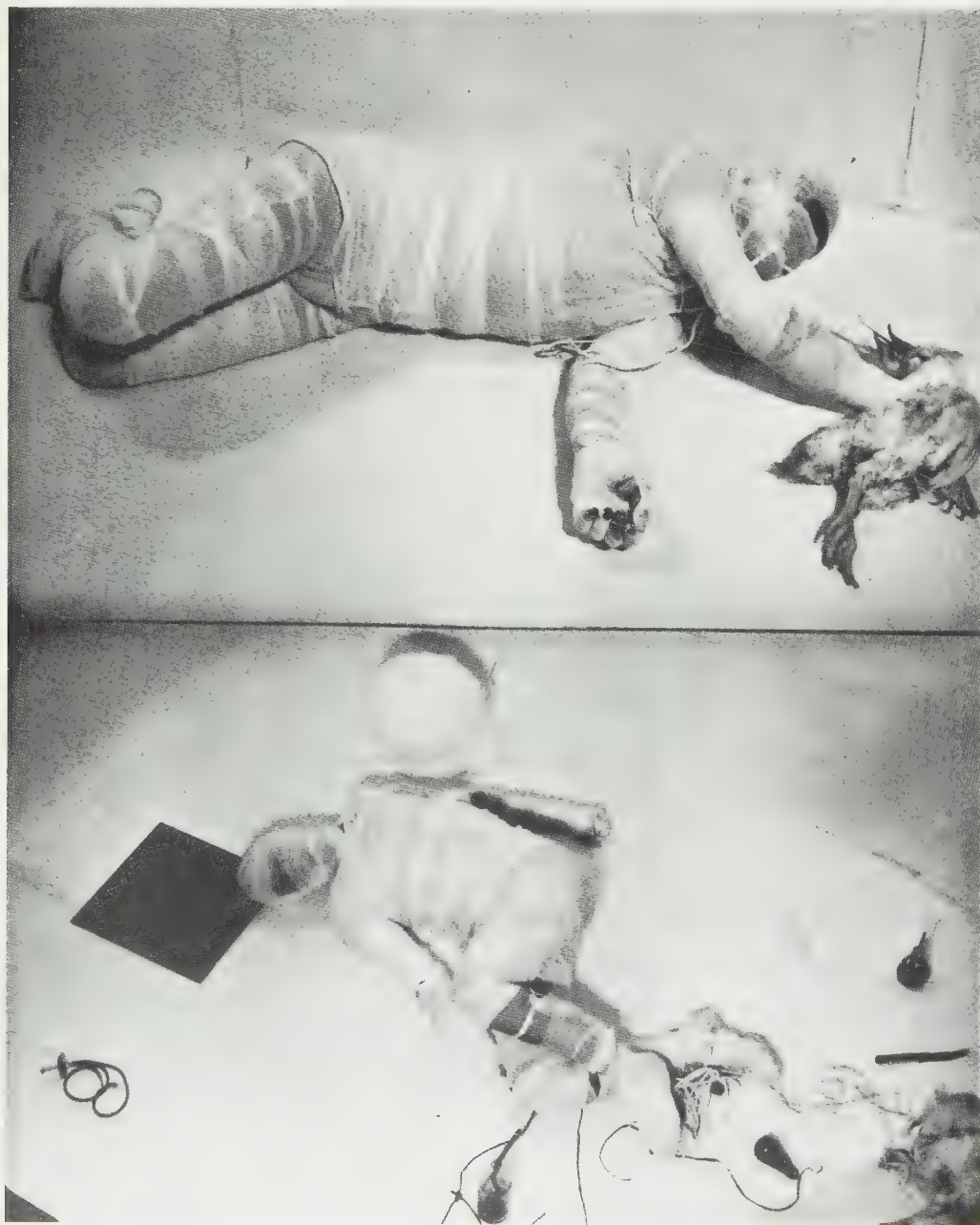


entirely-bandaged body of Schwarzkogler served as the model for a sequence of gestures incorporating the rapport of the human body to threatening objects such as glass splinters and medical implements. For Schwarzkogler, the sixth action formed the most intensive realization of his obsessions with corporeal and sexual impairment, and it would be his last action. However, the body most present in Schwarzkogler's work was that of his friend Heinz Cibulka; in the third action of 1965 (whose photographic documentation would become the pre-eminent iconography of Schwarzkogler's work), it is Cibulka's head and body that are bandaged and placed in intimate proximity with a network of wires, tubes, spheres, scissors and razors; in several images from the documentation, Cibulka's penis is engulfed by the body of a fish with a razorblade placed at its mouth, and immersed also within a bandage which leaks fluid. The photographs of Schwarzkogler's actions, with their overturned bodies passively subjected to terrorizing wounding and intimations of sexual assault, form a detritus that transmits open evocations of horror, dread and beauty: all the more powerful for their opaqueness, those assaults are then incessantly refigured and reconstructed within the distanced perception of their spectator.

As well as declining approaches to having films made of his actions (Kurt Kren, in particular, had discussed the possibility of filming his work), Schwarzkogler also left no written documentation of his performances; his girlfriend Edith Adam made detailed notes based on the six actions, but Schwarzkogler himself was involved only in the meticulous photographic documentation of the performances. During the years of the public notoriety of the Action Group in Vienna, the figure of Schwarzkogler was tangentially and unintentionally filmed (for example, accidentally caught in the film shot by Otto Muehl of Brus' Vienna walk); but his refusal of filmic

Heinz Cibulka in the
third action, 1965

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Schwarzkogler in the sixth action

documentation of his own work indicates a fundamental resistance to the banalizing process of representation – however shattered the forms of that representation might take in the works of experimental filmmakers such as Kren and Ernst Schmidt Jr. The refusal of cinema in Schwarzkogler’s work constitutes an extreme act of negation and control, in which the evidence of his work is then reduced down to static image-sequences of bodies pinioned in illuminated rooms; human movement is excised entirely from those traces of obsession rendered in light, so that the body stands frozen, often headless, its penis glaringly subject to an obliteration that remains always imminent.

By a final aberration, it was only after Schwarzkogler had completed (or abandoned) his series of six unfilmed actions that he began to conceive of film projects – in the mass of typewritten papers which he produced in his final, increasingly isolated years, ideas for film projects appeared alongside plans for new actions and grandiose architectural projects (as his internalized isolation from the world deepened, the scale of Schwarzkogler’s designs for the external urban environment around him expanded endlessly). In those never-realized film and television projects, Schwarzkogler extended the preoccupations of his previous actions with static and masked bodies subjected to the threatening presence of natural or manufactured objects; he now envisaged sexualized female figures, dressed in white, undertaking actions and gestures (vomiting into bowls, drinking liquids, using syringes to inject fluid into eggs): films of fragments, in opposition to narrative, impelled by obsession and the desire for reduction. During the same period, Schwarzkogler was exacting severe strategies of reduction on his own body, pursuing a regime of precisely-controlled starvation that was inspired both by his readings of Eastern mysticisms and by a perverse appropriation of nineteenth-

century Austrian dietary and bathing therapies. Although Schwarzkogler conceived of this intensive corporeal experimentation as one of healing, he became emaciated and began to experience bouts of acute depression; his art works became condensed down to ever-sparsier typewritten texts. With Edith Adam, he moved to a second-floor apartment at Heumühlgasse 20, alongside the main Vienna market, in May 1969. Both Nitsch (then living in Munich) and Heinz Cibulka attempted to break Schwarzkogler's isolation, and on 19 June he had a consultation with a psychotherapist who recommended electroshock treatment; he had been suffering from intense hallucinations, in which he saw himself surrounded by snakes from which he needed to cower in terror.⁷ The death of Schwarzkogler is the subject of contrary accounts. It seems that on the morning of 20 June, after spending the night with Edith Adam, in a state of extreme excitation and jealously accusing Adam of betraying him, Schwarzkogler fell or jumped from a window of his apartment, and after speaking incoherently for a short period to the astonished passers-by, soon died of multiple fractures and (as the autopsy states) a 'fat embolism'. According to some accounts, the Vienna police then burst into his apartment and instructed Edith Adam to look down at the dead figure on the ground below, asking her: 'Is that your husband?'

Although Schwarzkogler's notoriety in the years following his death centred largely on wild myths surrounding his suicide (which was reinvented as having resulted from the excision of his own penis during a performance, or from an LSD-propelled flight through his apartment window), the increasingly frequent exhibition and visibility of photographs of his work began to provoke a strong inspiration for visual artists in the 1980s and 1990s: a large-scale catalogue of all of Schwarzkogler's extant work, published in 1992,

7. Kristine Stiles, 'Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions', in *Out of Actions: Between Performance And The Object 1949-1979*, edited by Paul Schimmel, Thames and Hudson, New York/London, 1998, p.293 (Stiles based her account on a 1978 interview with Edith Adam, who has since died)

consolidated that influence. Through both its driving obsessionality and the focused sparsity of its surviving traces, Schwarzkogler's work possessed a depth and intricacy which appeared missing from the far-wider documented work of the other Action Group artists. Despite its sense of self-immersed, closed separation from the world, and its lack of filmic evidence, it was Schwarzkogler's work which contrarily exerted a special fascination for contemporary young artists worldwide, and generated his reputation as the most visually haunting and compulsively probing participant of the Action Group.



ART CRIMES AND EXILE

For a period of several years in the mid-1960s, the Vienna Action Group undertook art works which were viewed as being so deviant, obscene or socially destructive as to constitute criminal acts, meriting periods of penal incarceration for their perpetrators. The alliance of the Austrian judiciary and its media system generated an atmosphere of wide-scale public revulsion and anger against the Action Group. In the 1960s – and still today – Austria remained a country largely inhabited by manipulable peasants, shopkeepers and office-workers whose reactionary or fascistic political inclinations and gullibility to media frenzies rendered them the perfect enemies for the Action Group's provocations. Every action perpetrated by the artists was carried through in total awareness that it was likely to be summarily broken-up by the police, resulting in public insults and arrests: the declarations and manifestoes of the Action Group project both a gleeful anticipation of the upheaval their work will unleash, and also a degree of obliviousness to their own physical liberty and safety within that oppressive social framework. Across the twentieth century, few democratic societies systematically imprisoned their artists (however outrageous or confrontational the work of those artists might be) and condemned their work as criminal in the way

that the Austrian state responded to the Action Group; in totalitarian arenas such as Stalin's Soviet Union, by contrast, artists and writers were crushed, murdered and deported to death-camps in their tens of thousands. The work of the Action Group – performed in a democratic country that was deeply tainted by 1940s warfare but still untouched by 1970s terrorism – carried a uniquely fracturing and incendiary charge in its impact on that society.

The work of the Action Group burst out of an intentional obscenity that had never before been seen in such a degree of intensity in modern European art – an obscenity far more virulent and excremental than anything produced by the Dada or Surrealist movements, and propelled by the intricately combative conceptual obsessions of the artists. In many ways, the spectacles of the Action Group resonated more with the visceral, ritualistic performances of death and sex instigated by Roman emperors such as Heliogabalus and Caligula than with contemporary art, even that of the 1960s. Around the end of the previous decade, the Italian artist Piero Manzoni had canned his own excrement and sold it for its weight in gold, and the French artist Yves Klein had experimented with the gestural tracing of human bodies in fire, paint and other substances. In Japan, the Gutai and 650 Experience groups of artists had also activated performances of raw corporeality in which sexual upheaval was pre-eminent. But the work of the Action Group possessed a concentration in obscenity and an extreme insurgency that none of the international experimental art of the period attained or even aspired towards. In their direct unleashing of sex, excrement and blood through the framework of performance and into their audience, the Action Group also vitally abjected their fury – simultaneously a revolutionary furore, in the worldwide context of that moment of escalating radical protest – at the Austrian nation and more widely at

the nature of power itself.

The Action Group's work constituted an explicit refusal of the nation – the Austrian nation which had moved blindly from imperial glory to immersion in Hitler's fascism and on to catastrophic urban destruction in the span of thirty years, and whose postwar history still emanated a profound attachment to the political, bureaucratic and visual forms of fascism. The Action Group artists had direct experience of the contrary aberrations of power which fascism could wield, especially that of implosive warfare: Muehl had fought in the war, and Schwarzkogler's father had committed suicide in it. The Action Group responded with uproar to their inheritance as the bastard children of European fascism in a parallel way to the young West German filmmakers emerging at that moment – Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog and Wim Wenders; but whereas those filmmakers reflectively concertinaded the history of Germany with its contemporary dilemmas, the Action Group reacted to the Austrian nation with a wild and direct negation whose axis always remained the human body and its desires, fluids, sensations, ejections and affronts. In Brus' performance of masturbation and excremental expulsion – undertaken while loudly singing the Austrian national anthem – at the *Art And Revolution* event staged at the University of Vienna in June 1968 (close in time and intent to the street-riots and dissident events in Paris which had attempted to shatter the impermeable French state in the previous month), the very core of Austrian social power spectacularly disintegrated in caustic ridicule, at least momentarily.

The Action Group's art-crimes passed through a range of urban environments, from the cellar to the street and to the art gallery (and even in the mid-1960s, before his acquisition of Prinzenhof castle, Nitsch was already beginning to stage his Orgies

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Viennese police prepare to raid an action, 1967

Mysteries spectacles in the countryside around Vienna, where they became both spatially and ritualistically magnified, and also defused from their concentrated urban provocation). The cellar, pre-eminently, was the site of the eruption of crime for the Action Group and their arrestors. In photographs of the police-interrupted actions of Muehl and Nitsch, that space below the surface of the city is the

foundry from which the art-crime seismically resonates beyond its boundaries; the Vienna city police head downwards into the underground site where the crime is in progress and into which the audience has descended (often spilling backwards into the street in response to the subterranean bloodshed, intense odours and overcrowding). The cellar forms the abject, excessive space of dirt and refuse: an unliveable urban site that can only be inhabited momentarily and criminally via the generation of orgies or a corporeal over-accumulation of detritus, semen and blood. After the police intervention, the expelled artists emerge back into daylight, observed by the inhabitants of the surrounding tenements as well as by the mass of police – Nitsch, in particular, appearing dazed and drenched from head to foot in blood. The street itself is the site of immediate arrest for the criminal action in human movement, as Brus demonstrated with his *Action Vienna Walk*. And, in the work of the Action Group, the art gallery too can be a site abruptly vulnerable to intrusion and arrest, with their occasional excursions into collaborative gallery performances – especially at the Galerie Nächst St Stephan, in the centre of Vienna – creating an uproar and chaos (often that of violent disagreements between the artists and the gallery owner, or the other performers) that resulted in the sudden intervention of the police.

While the state-imposed criminality of the Action Group could necessarily take only one, linear form – that of arrest, sentencing and incarceration – the diverse exiles of the artists appeared in a number of contrary manifestations. The only artist who remained in Vienna, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, experienced an internal exile of deep solitude that propelled him terminally away from society. The exile of Brus formed more of a collaborative exile: in West Berlin, Brus helped edit a magazine which collected texts and images of the Action Group's

work and that of their associates (the editors, with advanced irony, styled themselves the Austrian 'government-in-exile'): the 'Exile' restaurant in Berlin's Kreuzberg district both incorporated its clientele's involuntary or self-willed expulsion from Austria, and provided a meeting-point where the sensations of exile could be mutually dissolved. But despite the original defiance of his exile, Brus could finally only return to Austria by painstakingly negotiating away his art-crimes with the state's judicial and governmental authorities. Nitsch's exile of the end of the 1960s, in Munich, formed a temporary aberration from which he was able to launch himself back into a permanent base for his work in Austria. And Muehl took another course of exile, enclosing himself with his commune in Vienna and then at the Friedrichshof in an isolated, often-total repudiation of Austrian society, until his 1990s mediatized arrest and lengthy incarceration finally reactivated the Action Group's former regime of penal exile.

The art-crimes of the Vienna Action Group formed unique and explosive bodily forces of provocation and social assault, the legal punishments of which had to be exacted immediately, through police-arrests of their perpetrators either in mid-action, or shortly after their performances. The emanation of criminality in the work of the Action Group forms a set of instantaneous and irreplicable gestures and expulsions, inflicted primarily on themselves and their immediately present audience, and brought to bear also on the society and government of the Austrian nation, and beyond. But the traces of those art-crimes also enduringly caught and accumulated in the films of the Action Group's performances, as vivid evidence of their aims, experiments and corporeal insurgencies (after the 1968 *Art And Revolution* event, the police persecuted the filmmaker Kurt Kren and rigorously searched through all of his films, mistakenly believing that

he had filmed Brus' performance and that the resulting film could be used as evidence at Brus' trial). Film itself is a crime which carries and propels forward the art of social destruction.



SEVEN THE FILMS OF THE VIENNA ACTION GROUP

The Vienna Action Group generated a body of films which are unique – in their contrary forms, strategies and preoccupations – as the essential counterpart to a twentieth-century performance art movement. The Action Group were not the first such movement to recognise the potential of cinema – from the Dada and Italian Futurist movements of the first decades of the century onwards, the realization of performance through its transmission into film images had been a primary preoccupation; but that preoccupation often initially mediated itself through film manifestoes (or, in the case of the Futurists, through film-experiments which are now lost), rather than via a tangible body of performance-impelled films. In the mid-1950s, a decade before the Vienna Action Group's films, the Japanese Gutai movement in Osaka had often documented their performance actions (such as those of Kazuo Shiraga and Saburo Murakami, with their acts of corporeal struggle and annihilation against the media of paper-screens and mud) with super-8 films; but those films served essentially to carry the linear documentation of actions, rather than existing as works which fired autonomously from the performances that they confronted. Throughout the period until the open availability of video-cameras in the 1970s, the medium of

photography remained dominant in documenting performance art worldwide: the traces of the Action Group's work vitally pivot between photography and film, with the work of the highly-professional commercial photographer Ludwig Hoffenreich (used by the Action Group artists precisely for its cold, objective beauty) forming the pre-eminent photographic representation of their actions, both in black-and-white and colour images. By contrast, the filmmakers allied to the Action Group formed active participants and collaborators in their work, often immersed as intensively in corporeal and visual experimentation and provocation as the artists themselves, and incurring some of the same reactions of social retribution as a result.

Although two filmmakers in particular – Kurt Kren and Ernst Schmidt Jr – became entangled in the Action Group's work in the mid-1960s to the extent that (in Kren's case) the still-discernible division between artist and filmmaker disintegrated to some degree, the Action Group also intermittently filmed their own actions or those of one another, seeking to eliminate the intervening element of representation which formed an impediment to their actions: the Action Group's films often emerge as mutating counterparts to their actions, rather than as the secondary documentation of those actions. Particularly in the final collaborations between Muehl and Kren, from the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s (at the time when Muehl had largely abandoned his public actions and was consolidating his experiments in communal life), a more open equivalence is reached between artist and filmmaker: in those films of gleeful acts of sexual and excremental furore, such as *Sodoma* (1969) and *Shit-Bastard* (1969), both Muehl and Kren appear as prominent figures within the film image (animatedly sodomizing the other participants, or being soaked in and made to drink liquid excrement), and the artist/filmmaker division evanesces.



Shit-Bastard (1969,
filmed by Hermann Jauk
and Kurt Kren)

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During the period when the films of the Action Group were made, those films were occasionally projected together as spectacles in their own right, within the same spaces in Vienna – cellars, insalubrious clubs and art-galleries – which also formed the venues for the Action Group's performances; they were, however, not screened during that period at the Austrian Film Museum in Vienna, despite the prominent engagement of its young director, Peter Kubelka, in experimental and structuralist film. The films of the Action Group – as intensive ocular and sensorial assaults on their spectators – were certainly never conceived to be projected in commercial cinema spaces, and programmes of experimental film staged within European museums of modern art were then extremely limited; the films acquired an itinerance and haphazardness in their projection, screened at that time before wild or drunken audiences at events which also incorporated small-scale actions staged to complement the film-screenings. Hermann Nitsch also occasionally projected films of his previous actions during the actual performance of new actions, imparting to film the quality of a seminal reference or launching-point in generating his obsessions from one action to the next. In the following decades, the films were shown intermittently at experimental film collectives such as Anthology Film Archives in New York and the Film-makers' Co-operative in London, in programmes that also encompassed far less spectacular film works concerned insularly with the nature of film itself. After his departure from Vienna in the 1970s, Kren would become the embodiment of the films' uprooted itinerance, endlessly travelling between American university campuses to screen his films of the Action Group to audiences of art students. It was only with the elevation of experimental film as a prominent art form in its own right, and the institution of large-scale film programmes within contemporary art

venues, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, that the Action Group's films began to regain a strong public visibility.

In the films of the Action Group, the impact carried by the sensory power of blood in performance is also carried by film itself: film materializes into an overwhelming and multiple substance, as capable of exacting resonances and responses on profoundly contrary and insurgent levels as is the blood unleashed in the act of performance: corporeal, mystical, ecstatic, societal and aesthetic levels. Blood forms a pivotal rip in the temporal duration of a performance: the deluge it inflicts upon the action's participants engenders an excessive calamity (often accompanied by the raw impetus of a sexual act in Muehl's performances, or by the sudden revelation of the healing of a crisis in Nitsch's performances); film too forms a point of visual overload from which all acts and elements of existence must be entirely reconfigured by the overhauled spectator. Blood and film also possess their gratuitous powers: in the flow of blood over the body in performance, that body becomes subject to a multiplicity of chance movements – each recuperable only in the film image – that all carry their own arbitrary, chaotic charge. And on a primary level, blood forms a powerfully glaring colour, in its collision both with the human body and with the film image that collects it. In the mixing of blood (human and animal blood is infinitely mixed in the Action Group's performances, with semen, urine, excrement, and other liquids and substances), an irreparable disruption of vision is generated both for the performance's spectator and for the film's spectator; even the potential healing of such a disruption, in the actions of Nitsch, forms a violent infiltration and erasure of the body, the dynamic scope of which can be rendered only by film. In the work of the Action Group, film constitutes the amalgam of corporeal debris and fragments accumulated within the image; however brief in

duration that accretion of textures and layers may be (a fraction of a second in Kren's films), it hooks into its spectator's perception. The spectator's eye then itself forms a screen, of horror, delight or fascination, for the impact of the action on film; and crucially, in the urgency of its rapport with film, that eye forms a lens of death with the aperture only momentarily open.

In the 1960s, the potential of film to carry such intricate resonances as those of bloodshed in performance was linked in the perception of filmmakers – including the Action Group's principal collaborators, Kren and Schmidt Jr – to the celluloid film-stock itself, which became imprinted with the image of the performance, and also with damage inflicted by the scratchings, amendments or attacks of the filmmaker's own hand. As in the experimental film culture of the same era in the United States, in the work of such diverse filmmakers as Kenneth Anger, Hollis Frampton and George Landow, the celluloid film-stock used for the Action Group's films itself possessed its own magical aura as the receptive but capricious medium for the filmmaker's obsessions. In the period before the video and digital image, the variability attached to celluloid film-stock constituted a pre-eminent means to explore the chance form of performance actions: the film image remained vitally unknown and subject to infinite deviation until it had been developed and projected. Even then, that vulnerable celluloid would go on to receive and accumulate the scars of each future public projection, just as the bodies of the Action Group's participants held the physical or mental woundings of their intensive acts. In Japan during the same period of the mid-1960s, the experimental filmmaker Takahiko Imura evolved a particular strategy in his films of performance actions, such as those he made of the work of the choreographer Tatsumi Hijikata, undertaking what he termed 'cine-dances', in which he moved freely

around the performance with his film camera, catching partial fragments which then transmitted a force of corporeal elation and visual compulsion to the resulting films (whose developed celluloid he then also subjected to manual assaults). The films of the Action Group's performances hold a parallel experimentation upon the substance and potential of celluloid itself, to render the chance gestures, ecstasy and raw fury of the actions.

Although the Action Group artists maintained a high level of public visibility in Vienna in the second half of the 1960s, with the exception of Schwarzkogler, their principal filmic collaborators – Kren and Schmidt Jr – remained far less prominent (as was the case too with their principal photographic collaborator, Ludwig Hoffenreich). Those filmmakers' involvement with the Action Group imparted a degree of notoriety to their work – Kren in particular shared some of the Action Group's persecution by the Vienna police – but gave them few financial or aesthetic rewards. While Brus and Nitsch, in particular, had become viewed as successful art-market celebrities by the end of the 1980s, with large-scale retrospectives of their work in prospect, both Kren and Schmidt Jr remained largely peripheral, isolated presences. Despite that obscurity, they formed essential figures in the original creation of the Action Group's work, and also in the survival and enduring virulence of that work.



Kurt Kren filming *Mama
And Papa* (1964)

EIGHT KURT KREN

Until his death in Vienna on 23 June 1998, at the age of sixty-eight, Kurt Kren had possessed a legendary aura of infamy for the previous three decades as the filmmaker most closely associated with the provocations of the Vienna Action Group. Always overridingly concerned with his own filmmaking strategies rather than with the particular preoccupations of Brus, Muehl, Nitsch and Schwarzkogler, Kren had contrarily created some of the most compelling and durable evidence of the Action Group's work in the form of determinedly fragmentary and disintegrated films of ephemeral performances – some of which he had appeared in himself, as simultaneously a sexual participant and anti-documenter of the Action Group's work. By the time of his death, he was also renowned as an experimental-cinema icon who had devoted himself stubbornly to unrewarded filmmaking obsessions at the expense of his own life: his work had led to his persecution and exile from Vienna, followed by many years of itinerant poverty and menial labour. It was only during the period at the end of the 1980s, when major international exhibitions of the Action Group's work began to be staged, that a resurgence of interest in Kren allowed him to return to Vienna. In fact, Kren's collaborations with the Action Group, undertaken over a period of six years, formed

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only a small part of his output in experimental cinema, which stretched over forty years from 1957 until his death.

Kren was born on 20 September 1929 and worked as a bank clerk during the early stages of his filmmaking work; he began to make structuralist films in 1957, and two of his films dating from before his first encounter with Muehl and his period of collaboration with the Action Group – *Trees In Autumn* (1960) and *Walls – Positive – Negative* (1961) – would be lauded by two of the prominent British-based theoreticians/practitioners of structuralist experimental film, Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Structuralist cinema involved the conception and editing of films according to rigorous, pre-set criteria, designed to generate works which demonstrated and disassembled the synthetic and industrial nature of film, together with its means of reproduction and its power upon spectatorship; the preoccupations of structuralist cinema – a very fluid movement which extended worldwide, encompassing such diverse works as those of Michael Snow and George Landow – often centred on preoccupations with shot-repetition, with circular and extended camera movements, and with the eradication of filmic narrative. In the case of Kren's own filmic strategies at the beginning of the 1960s, both mathematical and formal devices came into play: in one of his films, he arranged the length of each shot so that the number of frames it contained equated to that of all of the preceding shots. He also developed a strategy of using extremely short shots (often comprising a single frame) which 'flashed' their content into the spectator's perception; Kren often edited his films within the camera itself while shooting, after working out the shot-structure on paper before beginning to film. Although the most prominent Austrian experimental filmmaker of that period, Peter Kubelka (who also ran the Film Museum cinema in Vienna) shared a number of Kren's



structuralist preoccupations, the two filmmakers remained distant.

After his encounter with Muehl in a Vienna cafe (during the period when he was still working as a bank-clerk), Kren offered to film the series of public actions which Muehl was planning to undertake from the Spring of 1964. For Muehl, this was the opportunity to have a lasting and objective document in 16mm film made of his current work, but for Kren, the actions simply presented raw corporeal material to be used in extending his own filmic preoccupations, and he had no intention of producing representational or promotional documents of Muehl's performances. As a result, his film *Mama And Papa* (shot in Muehl's cellar on 4 August 1964, and, at least in part, conceived explicitly to be filmed by Kren) initially startled and angered Muehl on its first projection, precipitating an argument between the artist and filmmaker, although Muehl would grow to appreciate the film as a work in its own right and would collaborate further with Kren. Although Kren would often assert in later years that he had shot the film (together with his other collaborations with Muehl) in a state of utter drunkenness, its highly intricate form and construction belie this. Kren experienced difficulty in even having the film processed: the first laboratory to which he took the film negative told him that – since he had used so many rapid shots – nothing at all would be discernible in the developed reel; after looking at the negative, the staff then told Kren to get out of the laboratory and never come back. Kren was finally able to have the film processed by taking it to a ramshackle laboratory in the Vienna suburbs which ordinarily handled pornographic films, and *Mama And Papa* was developed there in a home-made device resembling a rudimentary washing-machine. Although Kren's proposition to film Schwarzkogler's actions was rejected, he also made a number of filmic collaborations with



Kurt Kren filming *The Eating, Drinking, Pissing And Shitting Film* (1967)

Brus, from *Ana* in 1964 to *20 September* in 1967; the latter film (shot in Brus' apartment and sometimes known in English as *The Eating, Drinking, Pissing And Shitting Film*) featured rhythmically repeated, close-up shots of Brus expelling long streams of excrement into a bucket, filmed by Kren while laying on the ground directly below the chair from which the crouching Brus released his excrement. Brus wrote to Muehl that he had wanted his excrement to be captured on

film in the same revelatory way that Hitchcock had filmed sweat on Cary Grant's forehead. Although Kren did not make a film of the following year's *Art And Revolution* event, at which Brus publicly defecated before a large audience at the University of Vienna, he still received the blame for its filming; since the police knew that the action had been filmed and assumed that Kren must be the filmmaker (rather than Ernst Schmidt Jr, who actually filmed the performance), they raided his apartment and searched through his films in their attempt to locate the document. Kren was also castigated in the Vienna media for having filmed the event, and then became entangled in the persecutions of the Action Group which would lead to their respective exiles from Vienna; as the filmmaker known to be most closely associated with them (and the generator of the images by which their actions would be primarily disseminated), he shared their harassment. Kren's final work with the Action Group came at the end of the decade, with his more free-form collaboration with Muehl on their projects of sexual and excremental celebration.

One of the results of Kren's involvement with the Action Group was that he lost his bank job (although his only regret was about his loss of the canteen privileges that came with the position). During much of the 1970s, he lived in Germany, including a stay in Berlin surviving from odd jobs. He made several visits to the United States to present his films but only emigrated there in 1978; most of his minuscule income came from university screenings of his films, and he spent years crisscrossing the country between universities in the car in which he also lived for long periods of time. Close to destitution, Kren finally took a job as a museum guard at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts in Texas, where he worked from 1983 to 1989. Since he had vanished for so long from Vienna, the myth grew there that he had spent the entire period of twenty years, rather than six, working

as a museum guard, and that he had produced no films at all during that period; in fact, throughout his absence, Kren had continued intermittently to create short structuralist films (one of which lasted only a second), exploring natural and material textures, and had instigated a new filmic form of exploratory 'home movies' of his travels. After his eventual return to Vienna in 1989, his work became the subject of gallery exhibitions and he also undertook several commissioned projects in the decade before his death: one of those films, *thousandyearsofcinema*, from 1995, marks the hundredth anniversary of cinema by expanding its time-frame outwards and interrogating conceptions of memory and repetition.

Although Kren's filmic alliance with the Action Group formed a relatively short-term and even aberrant phase of his work in structuralist cinema, it was through that body of films that his work eventually survived and reasserted its unique status at the end of the 1980s. Kren's filmic collaborations with the Action Group veer wildly in form – from the pure experimentation of *Mama and Papa* to the curtailed narratives of explicit sexual provocation in his final collaborations with Muehl. That alliance proved disastrous both in terms of Kren's twenty years of impoverished self-exile from Vienna, and also in the context of his relatively obliterated status as an Austrian experimental filmmaker in the 1970s and 1980s; but the obsessional commitment with which Kren pursued his filmic experimentations nullified the significance of such ostensible calamities. Kren's films of corporeal and filmic disintegration rigorously seize the originating elation and fury of the Action Group's performances (those of Muehl and Brus, in particular), and transmit those ephemeral sensory charges directly to their contemporary spectators via a visual medium of acute fragmentation and explosive excess.

NINE ERNST SCHMIDT JR

The history of experimental cinema is a multi-layered one, in which a multitude of marginal, peripheral figures serve as the underpinning for a small number of filmmakers whose work has been lauded and prioritised in books, exhibitions and retrospectives. The generation of a canon of prominent experimental filmmakers (through such seminal works as P. Adams Sitney's book *Visionary Film*) necessarily excludes and eliminates others who may be indigestible to a book's system of giving pre-eminence to filmmakers with particular preoccupations or styles. All art movements and histories proceed by forcible exclusion, from the vitriolic expulsions of dissident Surrealists by André Breton to the summary 'vanishing' of artists via contemporary art-market caprices; the configuring of the Vienna Action Group into a form that separates four major artists from other, annexed artists (such as Peter Weibel and Valie Export, as well as figures now consigned to oblivion) demonstrates both the necessity and arbitrariness of such strategies. Ernst Schmidt Jr is precisely such an ousted or neglected figure, while forming part of a vast lineage of filmmakers who produced innovative work but who are submerged in the prioritising histories of cinema. Until recently, Schmidt Jr's large body of work beyond his few collaborations with

the Action Group appeared in danger of disappearing entirely; while Kren's structuralist experiments maintained their profile (however subterranean), the films of Schmidt Jr – in many ways the more inventive filmmaker – remained a virtual and fragile presence.

Schmidt Jr's association with the Action Group came about in part through Muehl's desire for a more linear filmic documentation of his actions than had proved to be the case with Kren's experiments; Schmidt Jr, then in his late twenties, was viewed by Muehl as a potentially more pliable collaborator. However, his association with the Action Group remained intermittent and tangential; although he filmed other performances by Muehl, it was his completed film of an action staged in Muehl's cellar in June 1965 that formed his principal collaboration with the Action Group. That film, entitled *Bodybuilding*, was almost unique among the films of the Action Group in having sound elements and fragments attached to its images; all of Kren's films, together with most of the more anonymous filmic documents of the Action Group's performances, formed utterly silent works, concentrating their spectator's attention on their virulent imagery and generating internal sonic hallucinations in a way that few theorists of experimental cinema had ever conceived of (Antonin Artaud, in particular, had presciently called for the elimination of the then-imminent introduction of sound into cinema in 1929, emphasising what he viewed as the impact of dilution which sound would exert upon the violently transformative power of the film image). Schmidt Jr crucially accompanied the images of *Bodybuilding* with an antagonistic counterpart of rigorously-positioned noise which highlighted the fundamental disparity between the two media. However, his other major film of the Action Group's work, a two-minute film of the provocative *Art And Revolution* collective performance of 1968 (whose form, like that of *Bodybuilding*, was



Bimmel Bammel (Otto Muehl, 1965, filmed by Schmidt Jr). Photo © Sammlung Hummel, Wien/MAK

determined in part by a scarcity of film-stock) has no sound: like many other experimental filmmakers, Schmidt Jr's obsessions always collided with the poverty of his means.

Although Muehl initially conceived of Schmidt Jr as a malleable documenter of his performance work, Schmidt Jr – like Kren – had other ideas, though Schmidt Jr's concerns focused far less on the material nature of film itself. While Kren impelled the Action Group's wild gestural assaults in performance into the intricate form of a structuralist film-experiment, Schmidt Jr's preoccupation was that of capturing the raw intensity of the Action Group's social provocations within a filmic arrangement that also carried, to the maximum possible degree, their original spectator's perceptual experience of those insurgent corporeal actions. Schmidt Jr commented on *Bodybuilding*: 'Provocative reality is better than non-provocative. The film is situated formally between documentary films and structural films.'⁸ However, his determination to assemble an inter-destructive sonic/visual form in film also had the potential to surpass the perceptual range which an audience of his work could muster during the short-term event of the film's projection: 'The text fragments inserted in the sound of the film *Bodybuilding* remain largely unnoticed by the audience, because they cannot be properly comprehended at that speed. This is quite all right...'⁹ The film supremely exceeds the human eye and any other sensory encounter with it; Schmidt Jr's obliviousness to the incapacity of his audience to fully perceive the film (on one screening, at least) emphasises the absolute pre-eminence which he – along with Kren – imparted to film.

Schmidt Jr was born on 28 November 1938 in Hadersdorf, in eastern Austria; while Kren supported himself by working as a bank-clerk, Schmidt Jr had a job as an insurance-company clerk throughout the period when he was undertaking his collaborations

8. Linda Bilda, Ernst Schmidt Jr: Drehen Sie Filme, aber Keine Filme!, Secession/Triton Verlag, Vienna, 2001, p.38

9. *ibid*, p.98

with the Action Group, devoting himself entirely to his filmic activities only from 1970. He made four long films – including an exploration of the ways in which Vienna's urban and corporeal forms had been registered on film from the origins of cinema, in *Vienna Film 1896-1976*, from 1977 – together with over fifty short films. As well as working as an experimental filmmaker, Schmidt Jr also operated as an archivist and prolific theorist of experimental cinema. He formulated ideas about the necessity of destroying all hierarchies in images, and wrote about his horror at the gradual vanishing in modern society of all images and all human bodies: he gave priority in his writings to his abandoned or destroyed film projects rather than the realized ones, and examined the rapport of experimental cinema to other art forms and film's capacity to exert a transforming impetus upon those other media. Above all, Schmidt Jr's preoccupations (like those of many experimental filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s) were simultaneously opposed to corporate society and to industrial cinemas such as those of Hollywood. He co-founded the Austrian Filmmakers' Co-operative and worked for many years to compile a vast 'lexicon' of experimental cinema. He died in Vienna on 9 February 1988, at the age of forty-nine, in a condition of total poverty. Although the vast majority of his film writing and documentation remained unpublished, a scholarly experimental-film organisation in Vienna, SYNEMA, took over his projects and archives after his death. In 2001, a new profile for Schmidt Jr's films (including those not undertaken with the Action Group) emerged with the staging of an exhibition exploring his work at the Secession museum in Vienna; in particular, Schmidt Jr's preoccupations and imageries were positioned within the context of contemporary digital-art and filmic experiments in Vienna, such as those of Martin Arnold and the exhibition's curator, Linda Bilda.

PERFORMANCE/FILM

In the films of the Action Group, performance and film exist both as media that are homogenously welded-together, and also as autonomous presences, often posed in abrasive confrontation with one another. In the extreme form of this rapport, film and performance seek to negate one another; that relationship, throughout the history of performance art and cinema, has been the underpinning implosion which infuses raw creative tension into those two media – each remains imminently vulnerable to violent erasure and destruction at that intersection. Those volatile dynamics form the core of any film's liaison with performance art, and generate the open impact upon spectatorship which has been profoundly at stake, since the 1950s, in such films. Since the industrialized banalization of cinema that coincided with the onset of synchronized sound-technology at the end of the 1920s, only those compulsive fissurations between film and performance have successfully unleashed the transformations of the spectator's perception which the early experimental filmmakers – from Artaud and Buñuel to Vertov and Pudovkin – set out to achieve. Pre-eminently, it is the central presence of the body (in performance art, often a damaged or fragmented or peripheral body) within the film image that impels those transformations and conveys them to

the spectator, often generating a kind of corporeal filmmaking that exists in intractable autonomy both from mainstream industrial filmmaking and from the now-vanished performance action at the source of the film image.

In some of the anonymously-filmed documents of the Action Group's performances, the intention is solely to accurately record the action and to provide a sense of its space and duration. This strategy of exactly aligning the performance with the visual medium used to render it remains a dominant one in the documentation of contemporary performance art. The texture of the recording image in digital video imparts a quality of verisimilitude to that documentation which may well have been absent from the scratched black-and-white film-footage of the 1950s and 1960s, and from the garish pixellated blurs of video-documents from the 1970s and 1980s. The digital rendering of performance also allows it to follow the performance identically in duration (as opposed to the temporal limitations inbuilt within three-minute super-8 film-reels and even video-cassettes of several hours' length); it also largely avoids the factors of cost which plagued filmmakers such as Ernst Schmidt Jr, and also allows the recording in minute detail of the physical forms of skin, hair, fluids and gesture in the performance. But as a result of this facility, the documentation of performance art now takes the form of an unwatchably vast and endlessly replicated accumulation of digital images. The use of visual media to produce a record that is identical with the performance it documents eliminates the entirety of the range of insurgent creative strategies at work in films such as those of Kren and Schmidt Jr (and many other experimental filmmakers), and makes such visual documents – together with the performances they carry – identical too with the massive corporate image-industries of contemporary urban societies; such images then

become irreparably defused and lost within an infinity of other instantly-obsolescent images. For this reason, the oppositional and provocative strategies at stake in such film works as those of the Action Group's collaborators remain more vital and revelatory than ever.

Many of the films of the Action Group demonstrate an active engagement – often contrary or corrosive – with the act of performance. Writing about Kren's work in the 1970s, the filmmaker Malcolm Le Grice viewed this engagement as necessarily entailing an exhaustive exploration of urgent issues of human existence or individuality, alongside preoccupations with the form of the film itself. These preoccupations, for Le Grice, became determining factors in such aspects as the length of the film, which took the form of a curtailed fragment, wielded at its audience while existing in independence from the event or action which originally incited it; he writes: 'Kren's images are in no way "detached" – the image is not only a point of contact with the phenomenal world, but with Kren's particular experience of it. Another consequence of his subjective existentialism is an unwillingness to engage in large-scale, long-term works so that all his films have been short and succinct, dealing only with a range within which he can achieve an internal precision.'¹⁰ Operating solely within such a fragmented but rigorously controlled form, the film can generate the raw force required to seize the elements of the performance it needs in order to carry through that exploration of the filmmaker's own visual and corporeal obsessions.

Film can also, in its extreme instance, cancel out and recreate the act of performance. As Takahiko Iimura in Japan was demonstrating with his 'cine-dances', during the same period as the Action Group's films, the filmmaker's movements during the act of filmmaking and subsequent damaging of the celluloid image can work

10. Malcolm Le Grice, *Abstract Film And Beyond*, Studio Vista, London, 1977, p.102

to comprehensively erase the original intentions of the performance. When the form of the performance-film misfires in the perception of the original action's perpetrator (as in Muehl's initial resistance to Kren's filmic recreation of his performances), it is a sure sign that film has, in one way or another, seized the upper hand. Film increases in density and depth as the performance that initially propelled it falls away. Film also acts intrusively within the structure of the performance, creating a gap or wound in the medium of the body that counters the wound staged within the performance itself. Film undertakes a compulsory post-mortem interrogation of the performance whose images it holds, autonomously generating damage to the performance via the surface of the film celluloid, and (especially in Kren's work) by strategies of single-frame editing, arranged with a mathematical and compulsive precision that disassembles and dissects every gesture in performance. Film-editing on celluloid itself forms an action that razors, incises, revivifies or brings the performance-image to extinction. Film lures the intensity of the action into the material of its celluloid – in Kren's films, such as *Mama and Papa*, with their thousand editing-cuts in three or four minutes, that intensity is further accentuated by being denied time itself, and in Schmidt Jr's films, such as *Bodybuilding*, with their vivid colorizations, that intensity is directly transmitted into the sensory arena via the hallucination of colour. In turn, those filmic strategies are then brought to bear upon the spectator: the film meticulously explores the split-second fissures of the body in performance, and exposes those fissures permanently – once such flaws have been caught on celluloid, they can be opened out still further, and transformed in impact for their spectators, from medium to medium (from 8mm to 16mm formats, from film celluloid to video or DVD). The original image of performance becomes irrepressibly

sharpened via its sustaining by film over decades, just as it can also be summarily negated. But film also carries a corporeal charge that can deepen in provocation or anti-social derision or revelation in the decades after its registering of the torn or excreting or sexual body in performance – a charge that may result in the censorship and suppression of the film, as happened with the Action Group's films at the time of the media frenzies and legal persecutions of the artists and of Kren. That corporeal charge is sustained and even magnified as its focus shifts from the audience present at the original performance, to the multiple audiences of the film. Once caught in film, the performance is fixed in permanent shock, from eye to film and film to eye.

The disruptions exerted by film can also impose themselves beyond the habitual spaces of performance: in the case of the Action Group, beyond the spaces of the cellar or apartment and, occasionally, the art-gallery. The filming of performance art within streets and other urban zones remained a strong preoccupation throughout the postwar decades, often moving provocatively from the street into the cinema-space itself. In Paris, the films of the Lettrist art-movement undertook that intricate oscillation between performance, the city and the cinema. In projections of Isidore Isou's 1951 film *Tract Of Drool And Eternity* – a seminal source of inspiration for American experimental filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage, and for film-theorists such as P. Adams Sitney – the film tracks Isou's own performance-movements through the streets of Paris while simultaneously displaying the decimation and scratching-out of those actions, enacted on celluloid during the film's editing; Isou's fellow Lettrist Maurice Lemaître was pre-eminent in turning the cinema space itself into a performance-arena of uproar and provocation, staging assaults on his own spectators while projecting his 1951 film

Has The Film Already Started? (which had itself already been subjected to the kinds of celluloid-assaults favoured by the Lettrists). Such movements between performance, city and film also inflected the medium of photography (then still-dominant as a medium for performance documentation), in such projects as William Klein's panoramic street-photographs of Japanese neo-Dadaist and Butoh performers, included in his influential urban-photography book of 1964, *Tokyo*, which was designed to pursue his filmic preoccupations with the city and its figures via specifically gestural, photographic means. In the films of the Action Group from the same period, notably *Action Vienna Walk*, the city also forms the framework for the overriding work of spontaneity, insurgence and imposition exerted by film upon an urban performance and its human figures. The painted body of Günter Brus in performance, traversing the palaces and sites of power in Vienna on foot, is filmed as an aberrant corporeal incursion that blithely annuls that power.

Elements of all of these approaches to film and performance extend across the films of the Action Group, constituting a wide range of filmic actions counterposed against performance actions. The intimate dynamics of that rapport can be ascertained by exploring several films from the period 1964 to 1970, filmed by Kren, Schmidt Jr, by the Action Group artists themselves, and by more anonymous recorders of their performances.

ELEVEN MAMA AND PAPA

Kurt Kren's most notorious collaboration with the Action Group, *Mama And Papa*, shot in colour on 4 August 1964 around an action by Otto Muehl and lasting for four minutes, forms a film of extreme fragments: Kren's damaged images – relentlessly re-stated, vertiginously driven to accumulations of speed, and transmitting intact an aura of corporeal excess and obscenity – take their point of origin in Muehl's action but immediately overrule and surpass it by converting that action into a corporeal debris to be reactivated and engulfed by film. Although Kren makes restrained use in *Mama And Papa* of the oscillation between negative and positive film-images (a technique used extensively in his structuralist films, and which appears also in his other collaborations with the Action Group), the film revolves around another of his combative strategies: the use of single-frame editing, which both assaults the spectator's perception and institutes a disintegration of vision (single-frame editing was used also by a number of Kren's precursors and contemporaries, notably the American animator Robert Breer, but only Kren welds the technique so insistently into the bodies he films). As with many of his films, Kren's mathematically-determined form of editing, based in *Mama And Papa* on eighty-two shot-sequences or strands, was

worked-out before the action's shooting, and exists in direct tension with the chaotic uproar of Muehl's action itself (although Muehl too often produced an advance scenario for his actions). While Kren's film infinitely fractures corporeal surfaces and dissolves them into filmic movement, Muehl's own intentions for the human figures in his actions were to empty them entirely of purpose, in order for them to exist only as 'material' elements of the actions: the negated human figures then function solely as 'bodies' within the performance (by contrast, Muehl located any 'motivation' for his action specifically in the domain of memory, within his individual war-experiences of carnage as a young soldier). In their contrary ways, both Kren and Muehl exact corporeal transformations from human figures, disassembling them into otherwise-void components for performance and for film.

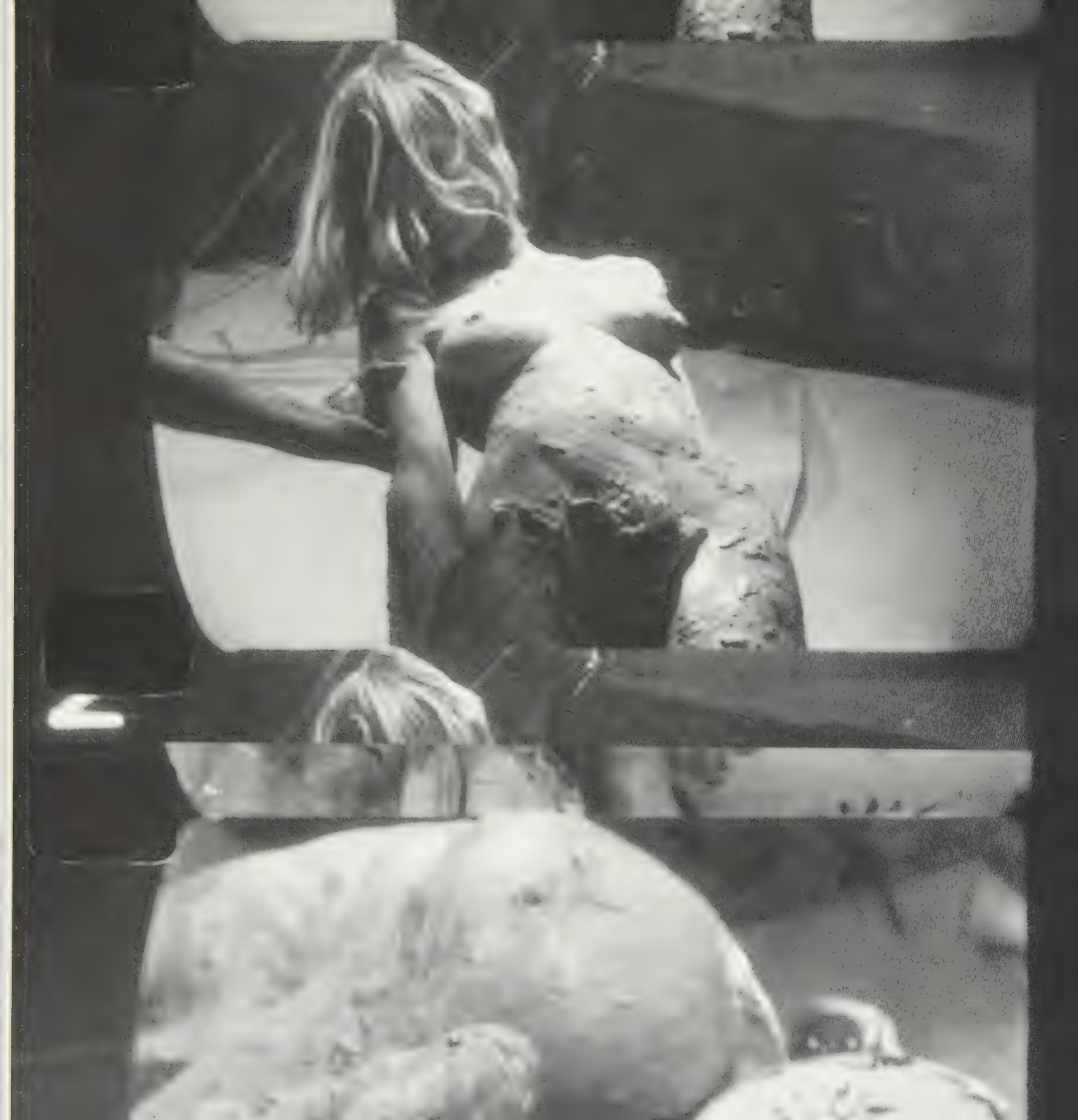
The film begins with a series of four titles, shot ineptly in black lettering on a white background and eroded by flaws in the film stock; Kren had the title-sequence shot 'in-house' by the film-laboratory in the Vienna suburbs whose specialism in developing pornography rendered it oblivious to the content of Kren's images, thereby avoiding the problems he experienced with other film laboratories. The absence of the filmmaker within the anonymous titles imparts an opening aura of cold objectivity to the film (as though the spectator were about to witness a scientific or technical demonstration) and makes the abrupt exhilaration of Kren's first images all the more startling. The film's titles, printed in small characters, form a skeletal compendium of its own components: its category, 'materialaktion mühl', its number and date, '6/64', its title 'mama und papa', and its ownership, 'copyright kren' (Kren is not explicitly identified as the film's maker, only as the denier of the film's reproduction); the titles are located far from the meticulously hand-inscribed titles adopted by



many experimental film-makers (such as Kenneth Anger and Jean Genet), and far too from the professional title-sequences of mainstream cinema. Everything beyond the images themselves is abdicated in Kren's film strategy.

After the title-sequence, *Mama And Papa* begins with a negative image of an off-centre disembodied mouth, set in articulatory movement against silence and glaring white light, with the presence of another physical component in a far corner of the frame; the image appears again (with small variations) a few seconds later, then twice in the final moments of the film – by the time of its last appearance, the mouth has taken central position within the frame, and the other object has vanished. Kren begins with a break in the upheaval of the film and a momentary respiration: every other image in *Mama and Papa* has its source in the headlong physical uproar of Muehl's action. From its first moment, Kren's film exerts its autonomy from the time and narrative of Muehl's performance, and initiates its own preoccupations with systematic image-repetition and corporeal disappearance. The film stops dead in silence at its very first image, establishing its own conception of time and arresting the spectator's eye before then plunging it directly into the visceral uproar of the action.

The elements of bodies incorporated into Kren's film form a rigorously scrambled arrangement. Every corporeal gesture directed by Muehl has its focus and direction rigorously extracted during its overhauling into a filmic component, so that gesture always accelerates and the revelation of faces and naked body-parts (always focused on the sexual organs) escalates. The time Kren creates for the film is one of elisions and reversals, with an infinite set of body-traces and movements – each with its own intricate resonances and its corporeal memories triggered by relentless repetition – condensed



into the film's four-minute duration. Whenever Kren devotes more than a frame to an image, that allocation of time serves to pinion those acts which consolidate his gestural film-time: acts of cutting, pouring, throwing, sucking. But each moment of focus which the film allows the spectator, such as the slow-motion nipple-sucking of a mouth, then incites a deliriously rapid accumulation of single-frame shots that functions as a kind of ocular reprimand for the spectator, for the taking of any easy pleasure in the act of viewing.

In *Mama And Papa*, it is the sexual organs (in this film, female sexual organs, although Kren also remained an avid filmer of penises and anuses in other collaborations with the Action Group) that serve as the axis of vision. The sexual organs – the mouth of the vagina, together with the nipples – form the focus both of the pourings and suckings of Muehl's action, and of Kren's film: performance and film collide solely in sex. All body-parts and other objects (eggs, balloons, and a range of fluids) in the film revolve around the vagina, as the aperture which gathers and generates both images and fluids; those objects – such as balloons which separate bodies and must have their membranes burst – work either to materialize or cancel impediments to sex acts. While Muehl's original action chaotically meshes together imageries of sex, birth and violence, Kren's transformation of it in *Mama And Papa* is both oblivious to sex and saturated with sex, as it takes the raw material of sex and of sexual organs as the pre-eminent visual medium for its own filmic strategies.

Mama And Papa emphasizes the corporeal presence of Muehl himself at the heart of his action, and also as the instigator and commissioner of Kren's own film. Muehl is seen peripherally throughout the film in single-frame images, as a disembodied face caught between female thighs or under buttocks, or as a mouth



sucking nipples; in the film's final sequences, he appears more prominently, still as a staring and disembodied face, now gripped within an armlock. Even after the shooting and projection of the film, it was still Muehl's face that preoccupied Kren; he spoke of Muehl being 'white in the face' immediately after watching *Mama And Papa* for the first time, aghast at the disparity between Kren's film and the documentary record he had expected. Despite the horror of Muehl's initial response to the film, he and Kren would collaborate again twice over the following four months, on Kren's *Leda And The Swan* and *O Christmas Tree*, both films again drawn from actions by Muehl. And Kren's films would often be shown by the Action Group over the next few years, at collaborative events devoted to their work or as an essential accompaniment to their performances. However, it would be Kren himself who would enduringly embody his film *Mama And Papa* – physically carrying it with him for years on end, on his itinerant travels and screening-tours across the United States and Europe – and always repeating: 'The film of the action is not a document.'



ACTION VIENNA WALK

In 1964, the same year in which he filmed *Mama And Papa*, Kren undertook his first collaboration with Brus, *Ana*, around an abandoned action in Muehl's apartment that was staged without a public audience; Kren edited the film with slightly less obsessional rigour than *Mama And Papa*, using fewer cuts and allowing the corporeal presences in the film to gradually disintegrate into sensory blurs: from those shattered, naked or bandaged but still-gesturing bodies, only the extreme or essential traces survive. Kren also diverted his focus from the two bodies (those of Brus and his wife Anni) in order to repeatedly film the tracks of paint and other substances inscribed over the walls of the enclosed space, until the over-exposed shots of the walls emit blinding white-light and abruptly terminate the film. Muehl had introduced Kren to Brus, who outlined his initial ideas for a film-document of his action to a receptive Kren (but, as happened with Muehl, the resulting work – primarily demonstrating Kren's adamantly-pursued filmic strategies rather than the action itself – was not at all what Brus had anticipated). In many ways, it is a more offhand and anonymous two-minute film of Brus' work of that period, *Action Vienna Walk*, from the following year, that forms the more illuminating exploration into the

provocations and representational dilemmas vital to Brus. *Action Vienna Walk* was filmed in the streets of the city on 5 July 1965 (on the day before an exhibition began of Brus' work at the Galerie Junge Generation in Vienna): Muehl had bought an 8mm film camera of his own after his dismay at the first screening of Kren's *Mama And Papa* in the previous year, and he filmed Brus' action unobtrusively; Schwarzkogler was also credited by Brus with having shot some of the film images, although he is visible in the background of several shots holding a photographic rather than film camera.

In Muehl's film, the representation of Brus' walk forms a narrated action that visually counters the performance itself: that performance was undertaken momentarily, in a panic, with the preoccupation of imminent arrest, but also possessed a fixed route (undetected in the film itself) that had been meticulously worked-out in advance in order to encompass Vienna's crucial sites of historical fracture, extending from the Neue Hofburg (part of the immense Habsburg palace-complex in the city's centre), from whose balcony Hitler had announced the annexation of Austria to Nazi Germany in 1938 in front of delirious crowds, to the walk's destination point at the Stephansdom cathedral, which had been largely obliterated by the end of the war in 1945. Painted entirely in white, with a jagged black line extending down from his head to his boots, Brus steps out of a car that has driven him to the Heldenplatz square. From that point, the film is a collection of shot-fragments that cohere to the body, as Brus moves on through the city, leaving the palace-complex and crossing into the city's corporate heart of offices, shops and art-galleries. Almost immediately, Brus is stopped in the Stallburggasse alley by a policeman in an outfit as garish as his own, called upon to explain his acts (which Brus clearly does, gesturing and pointing wryly), and taken to a police-station; he is then driven



away in a taxi, and the final shots of the film show Brus' collaborators and several amused onlookers dispersing away into the city. The film (which has no titles at its beginning or end) constitutes an open, near-fictional document, with the two key elements of its narrative as a performance-action entirely absent: Brus' body is not seen being painted by Muehl in his cellar, and there is no trace in the film of the legal punishment Brus incurred for his action two days later (a public-order fine for disturbing the peace) – those events fall over opposite edges of the film's own time.



In another dimension from that of its narrated representation of a human figure arbitrarily walking through city-streets (a preoccupation of many European fiction-films of that period, such as those of Godard and Antonioni), *Action Vienna Walk* also encapsulates and projects a filmic act of provocative psychogeography which seizes the materialization within the city of an insurgent body that annuls that city's enduringly fascistic or oppressive structures. The city appears violently re-imagined and recreated from within the act of

Brus' walk itself, which generates a profound corporeal fissure in the city's suppressive facade. Brus' walk is one of wryly smiling solitude, with his exposed trajectory surrounded by the documenters of the action and by crowds of bystanders; the film carries the impact of that endangered and solitary body in urban movement, broken within itself by the jagged line that traverses it from head to foot as it also breaks through the rigid carapace of the city. The film exists simultaneously as a calmly linear document and as an instrument of disruption: although it linearly follows the figure of Brus through Vienna, the film has – inbuilt within its form – the potential to represent its own negation, through the sudden disruption that coincides with Brus' arrest. But finally, the film's linear narrative reasserts itself in its closure, with the vanishing of Brus' figure and the scattering into the city of the action's witnesses.

Behind Brus' figure in its confrontational solitude, the film momentarily captures the preoccupied figures of Rudolf Schwarzkogler and Ludwig Hoffenreich in the background of the images. Schwarzkogler, bearded and smartly dressed in a suit, is manoeuvring at a distance around the body of Brus in order to register images of it, while the professional photographer Hoffenreich – the principal representer in photography of all of the Action Group artists' performances during that period – is also working out trajectories and spatial junctures from which to coherently register Brus' provocative movements through urban space. Those dilemmas of representation, imprinted incidentally and almost by chance on film-celluloid, themselves form intricate acts of performance in counterpoint to that of Brus – Schwarzkogler's exacting preoccupation with photography as the sole visual means for the meticulous representation of his own actions is here abruptly skewed and overturned by the urgent necessity for an immediate

representation of Brus' momentary action. And along with the figures of Schwarzkogler and Hoffenreich, more incidental representers of Brus' action are visible: photographers who appear to be unconnected with the Action Group and obviously record the action as a tourist spectacle (in the heart of Vienna's tourism-zone). Other spectators look on in horror or fascination or indifference. *Action Vienna Walk* is itself a filmic dissection of representation: of the collision between the visual media of film and photography, and of the nature of performance and its intended documentation. In all of the film's shots (even during those of his arrest), Brus looks and smiles at the camera repeatedly.

At least in its ephemeral duration and the near-absence of specifically filmic intentions on Muehl's part in shooting it, *Action Vienna Walk* forms a slight film that incorporates a seminal performance. Brus' street-action (principally in its photographed form, rather than in the form of Muehl's film) was to prove inspirational, over the subsequent decades, in the international framework of performance art undertaken, often with oppositional or provocative aims, within oppressive urban environments. In many ways, *Action Vienna Walk* holds Brus' work in an innocent and guileless state, despite the deliberate self-exposure in his urban performance to the legal retributive power of the city's authorities. Over the following years, he would carry through (also before a film camera) his far more exacting actions, with the performances of public excretion and anti-national masturbation that would lead to his forcible exile from Austria, and with the extreme project of violent self-interrogation (in performances he titled as works of 'self-laceration' and 'sheer madness') that would eventually culminate in the cessation of his activities as a performance artist, and the effective severance of his collaborative work with the Action Group.

THIRTEEN BODYBUILDING

Ernst Schmidt Jr's film *Bodybuilding*, constructed around one of Muehl's cellar-actions from May 1965, is the most complete – and simultaneously the most fragmented and ferocious – work by the filmmakers associated with the Action Group; it is also one of the few films of the Action Group to make intricate use of sound in rapport with its images. That emphasis on sound immediately aligned the film more closely with Muehl's intentions than had been the case with Kren's silent films of the previous year. Muehl conceived of his actions at this time as incorporating the destruction of both body and space through the violent intervention of materials (of whatever kind): for Muehl, the result of that process of destruction would be both accomplished and perceived sonically, rather than visually (an impact lost in any purely silent film made of the actions). At the time of the making of *Bodybuilding*, Muehl was preoccupied in his actions with demonstrating collective physical acts that served as training-sessions for warfare or human decimation: the predominantly-male bodies in this series of actions were tightly bound by bandages, and either vanished or became transformed into monstrous figures beneath them; within a cellar-space traversed by exhalations of fire, they conducted exhaustive gestures with implements such as chest-

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expanders, before finally being endowed with flowers alongside axes and other weapons. Schmidt Jr's nine-minute film of the *Bodybuilding* action was not intended for cinematic projection; it was

subsequently projected, along with Kren's *Mama And Papa* and *O Christmas Tree*, within the same space as it had been shot, as a kind of visual prelude to further actions by Muehl carrying the same obsessional concentration on a mutant corporeal amassing, staged in his cellar in the Perinetgasse alley, in a peripheral area of Vienna on the opposite side of the Danube canal to the city centre.

Schmidt Jr skilfully deployed on *Bodybuilding* the entire range of techniques at work in European experimental cinema of that period: the film in effect forms a kind of counterpart to his attempt to compile comprehensive 'lexicons' in his film-research work. Schmidt Jr experimented with the matter of celluloid, damaging it and using a range of reverse-processes and negative-image techniques; he allowed light to leak into the film's processing in order to corrupt the images (as the Lettrist filmmakers also did); he employed lurid, blazingly accentuated colour by both solarizing and re-colorizing the images, adding fire-scorches onto the celluloid which highlighted those occurring in the performance-space itself; he shot only a small amount of footage of the action (for reasons of poverty), and intervals of void filmic space (prominent in many experimental films, such as those of Kubelka), in the form of black film-leader, appeared rhythmically between the images of Muehl's action: and Schmidt Jr repeated shot-sequences, speeded-up and slowed the images, and relentlessly dissolved the spatial coherence and narrational elements of the original action, thereby disorientating and assaulting the film's potential spectator. Although the film was shown soon after its shooting in the context of Muehl's subsequent actions, Schmidt Jr's intricate work of editing the final version of the film would extend into the following year. The film forms a vast compendium of the multiple strategies at work in the destruction and transformation of cinema.



Much of the originality and aberrance of *Bodybuilding* emerges from its intensive experimentation with sound; while the treatment of the filmed images methodically collects the then-current experimental-cinema techniques, sound is allowed a more gleeful and gratuitous existence in the film. Schmidt Jr assembled a range of sonic fragments (film and television soundtracks, and 'found' sources) to insert across the film, from soaring vocal-orchestral music at its opening to brief snatches of radio-dialogue that coincide exactly with particular elements of the action and impart a momentary social framework to it. Schmidt Jr edited the soundtrack meticulously as an oscillation between sounds that, in the context of the film, are made to mesh wryly or corrosively with the images, and other material whose sonic impact stems from its incoherence and blatant disparity with the images; an element of disruptive chance is channelled into the sounds' editing. Schmidt Jr used no sound recorded during the action itself (despite Muehl's conception of the sounds of destruction generated by his action as being crucial to its form), instead creating a soundscape of insurgent noise-fragments and silence that exists in tension to the action.

Along with the soundscape of *Bodybuilding*, Schmidt Jr – like Kren – uses his images to overrule the original action and to reinforce the filmic scope of his own experiment. But where Kren's films negate the action by instantly disassembling it into the film medium, in *Bodybuilding* Schmidt Jr takes a more enveloping approach to the original performance; elements of it are often clearly shown (Muehl is repeatedly seen directing the action and instructing its figures, and the entirely-bandaged figure presents itself centrally to the film-camera at the action's closure), but the action becomes gradually incorporated into the film's own time and conception. The film moves at a speed which is in excess to that of the action, overlaying that

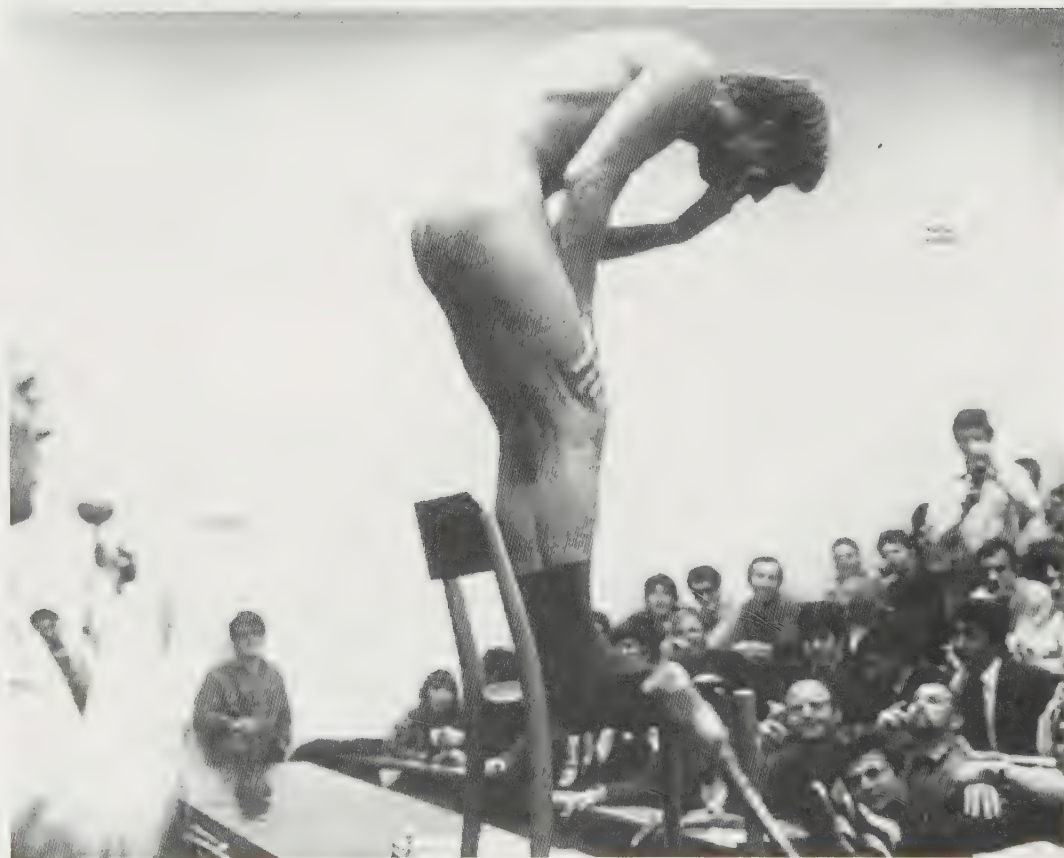
action both with the experiments it exacts on its own images, and through the acceleration and density of its form (Schmidt Jr was aware too that his film was in excess of the sensorial capacities of its spectator, who is both seized and refused by it, and would need either to view the film repeatedly to gauge its impact, or else perceive it as a kind of unique filmic hallucination). Schmidt Jr's film also exists in some tension to Ludwig Hoffenreich's photographic documentation of the same action, in both colour and black-and-white images, which lucidly frames the action's figures, and resulted in numbered photographic editions which Muehl could subsequently sign himself and market as art-work offshoots from his action. In many ways, *Bodybuilding* is the outstanding film of the Action Group's work: violently independent in its own filmic conception, but still determined to carry the glaring evidence of those artists' unprecedented, irreparable provocations, and to transmit that work within a medium which projects all of the actions' virulent life.

FOURTEEN ART AND REVOLUTION

Three years after he had shot *Bodybuilding* in Muehl's cellar, Ernst Schmidt Jr sustained his intermittent association with the Action Group in his role as the sole filmmaker to record their *Art And Revolution* collaborative event in Vienna on the evening of 7 June 1968. The Action Group had been invited to participate in the event (which was staged explicitly as a social protest) by a Maoist organization, the Association of Austrian Socialist Students, who gave the event its title. From the Action Group, Brus and Muehl agreed to take part in the form of a simultaneous action, together with several of their close associates, such as the artist Peter Weibel and the writer Oswald Wiener; the venue was one of the main lecture theatres at the University of Vienna. Schmidt Jr's final collaboration with the Action Group forms a fragmentary set of filmic incisions into their most provocative action, which would lead both to the artists' enforced exile from Vienna and also to the erasure of the city as the site and focus of their work.

The form of Schmidt Jr's film is determined by the immense disparity between its own incidental, tenuous existence and the legendary status of epochal outrage and catastrophe which encloses the action itself (and, by extension, Schmidt Jr's film too). At the time

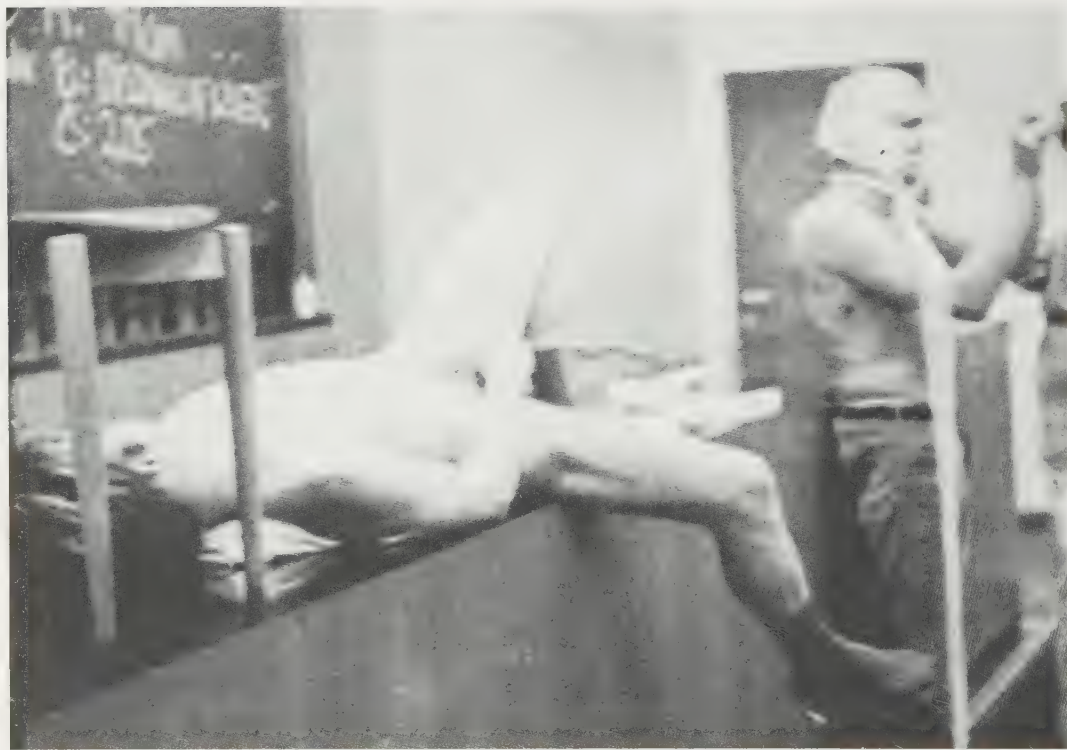
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of the shooting of *Art And Revolution*, Schmidt Jr was preoccupied primarily with developing his 'lexicon' film-research projects; in that same year, he published in German a book entitled *The Other Cinema: A Lexicon Of New European Films*, and almost all of his meagre resources went into that work. The impact of *Art and Revolution* is carried in the sheer scarcity of its images; Schmidt Jr could afford to use only a very limited amount of black-and-white film, with a total duration of less than a minute, and shot his footage



rapidly, leaving him with no remaining film with which to capture the final stages of the action. In subsequently editing his film – which he viewed as being unfinished – Schmidt Jr more than doubled its length to two minutes, repeating every image of the action (each shot appears once in positive and once in negative), and adding several sequences of unconnected footage: images from a ‘found’ documentary film on the theme of dog-training, and also fragments from a film he had shot himself of an outdoor action by Muehl. Schmidt Jr regarded this strategic amalgamation of images from the action with disparate material as working explicitly to overrule the mythification of the



event (together with the vitriolic media frenzy which was integral to that myth), and also as negating the film's potential status as a homogenized documentation of the event that could then be easily assimilated by the authoritarian and cultural structures of power operating in Vienna. Both he and Kren always worked insistently, in their different ways, to cancel the subjugated status of cinema in rapport to the performances at stake in their films.

Schmidt Jr's film, however, had no public profile at the time and played no part in the implosive impact on the Action Group generated by the *Art And Revolution* action, nor in that action's



incitation of Vienna's media. In its skeletally curtailed form, the film carries only partially-glimpsed elements of those acts which rendered the performance criminal and resulted in the penal condemnation of Brus and Muehl. Brus is seen energetically masturbating in one shot, but – since the film is silent – is not heard singing the Austrian national anthem (the simultaneity of act and sound being crucial both for Brus' provocation and its punishment). The unleashing of excrement had been pervasive in previous performances by Brus in that year: he had publicly defecated and drunk his own urine for the first time during his *Sheer Madness* action at an art-museum in the

West German city of Aachen in February 1968, and had then undertaken his *Citizen Günter Brus Observes His Own Body* action at a bar in Vienna (formulating his public expulsion of excrement directly as an attack upon society, in the texts he wrote around the action, and also relating it to the brown-shirted militaristic figures from the early periods of Nazism), in the month preceding the *Art And Revolution* event. The expulsion of excrement and the drinking of urine, together with razored self-laceration and the wearing of women's stockings, continued with accumulating extremity in Brus' performances until their abandonment two years later; film and photographic images of those actions would then continue to haunt Brus' subsequent work in figurative, hallucinatory drawing, particularly at the end of the 1980s. In Schmidt Jr's film, the excrement smeared on Brus' body is clearly seen – but not the actual expulsion and fall of Brus' excrement that had already been privately filmed by Kren in the *20 September* collaborative project of the previous year. (Such excremental falls would begin to appear even in more mainstream European cinema by the following decade, with works such as Wim Wenders' *Kings Of The Road*, from 1976, in a shot in which a travelling film-projector repairman leaves his van and lengthily defecates at the side of the road). Other voids and absences are marked in Schmidt Jr's film: the moments at which Brus razored several wounds into his chest and thigh are not captured in the film-image, and appear only as already-inflicted corporeal lacerations and tracings of blood.

The figures of the Action Group in Schmidt Jr's film form momentary apparitions, exacerbated in their ghostly quality by the overturning of every positive image by Schmidt Jr into a negative one. Brus had intended to use the occasion of the collaborative event, with its large audience and potential for a high public profile, as the arena

for his own individual project of making the acts of the body (pre-eminently, his own body) the generating site for a conception of art and revolution that simultaneously unscreened the hidden operations of both power and the human body; in Schmidt Jr's film, however, the images impart a hesitant aura to Brus' acts as he is caught at the interstice between provocations (squatting on a wooden chair with his back to the audience, naked apart from his socks and preparing to defecate, then abruptly appearing wounded by razorcuts that have already occurred). Muehl too appears momentarily, whipping one of his naked associates with a belt in front of the lecture-hall's blackboard, while Weibel has only an ephemeral presence, lecturing at the audience with his arm on fire. The body possesses a phantom existence in Schmidt Jr's film of vanishing corporeal traces, which evokes more tellingly the brutal suppression and eradication of worldwide mass-protest movements in that year, rather than the insurgence of the body into revolution.

The audience for the *Art And Revolution* action is never seen in Schmidt Jr's film: all of those fleeting images amass at the performers' bodies, as arbitrary but concentrated filmic probings. However, that audience is clearly visible in photographic documents of the action: spectators crowded-together in the bench-seating usually occupied by students attending lectures, smoking, laughing or focused on the performance; Schmidt Jr himself is visible on one side of the auditorium, standing with his film-camera poised at an oblique angle. The very survival of his film depended on its not being projected for a public audience during the subsequent media and legal furore over the event; Schmidt Jr's film accidentally escaped the wrath of the Vienna police, who assumed Kren to be the film's perpetrator and subjected him, rather than Schmidt Jr, to their searches and insults. Schmidt Jr himself had to rescue the film into

existence through its editing, doubling the images and also meshing them with alien, incongruous materials to react against. The unique impact of Schmidt Jr's *Art And Revolution* film emerges entirely from the volatile concentration of its snatched images and from their ability to penetrate directly into the raw time and immediacy of the action; by contrast, in contemporary performance documents, the digital image, with its endless time-expanse and infinite replication, holds the exact opposite of that intensive sparsity. *Art And Revolution* is a film of defiant bodies assembled momentarily in provocative desperation.

ACTION STRESS TEST

The final action undertaken by Günter Brus also marked the end of the films of the Vienna Action Group: Brus' most violently self-exploratory performance, compacting mutilations, screams and abandonments, also finally engulfed film as the medium that had both recorded and challenged the work of the Action Group over the previous six years. Brus' action took place in Germany, at the Aktionsraum performance-space in Munich, at eight in the evening of 19 June 1970, over a year after he had left Vienna to escape the impending sentence of imprisonment that followed his *Art And Revolution* criminal conviction. The venue was an empty room with tiers of seats for the small audience. Brus had written an invitation-text for distribution before the action, in which he explicitly stated his intentions: 'Finally, art has caught up with sheer madness'¹¹. He detailed the physical impacts he anticipated exerting upon his own body, including a range of self-mutilations and their abrupt abandonment; he placed his action in direct conflict both with the banalizing structures of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, and also with the press-media insults that had criminalized his actions. He saw this final action as a tearing-away of the body from social language and as an individual confrontation with madness, in the

11. Brus, invitation-text for Action Stress Test, in Elisabeth Jappe, *Performance, Ritual, Prozess: Handbuch der Aktionkunst in Europa*, Prestel, Munich, 1993, pp.78-9



form of a project of interrogative research into the body under intense pressure. In his text, Brus noted that he would be aware of the audience present for his performance, but immediately censured their potential participation in his action (during this period, Muehl's own final spectacles, staged riotously before large public audiences, often involved degrees of sexual participation from their spectators). Finally, Brus viewed his action as a self-willed termination of conflicts. As well as his text on the action, Brus also made a series of drawings to accompany it. Although the obsessions driving Brus' work with the Action Group would sustain themselves into his work of the subsequent decades, undertaken in the forms of drawings and prose-poems, the action in Munich formed the definitive ending of his involvement with the Action Group; over twenty years later, he stated: 'After *Action Stress Test*, I put a final full-stop to my years under the sign of Actionism'¹².

12. Brus, in *Limite du Visible*: Günter Brus, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1993, p.102 (translated from the French)

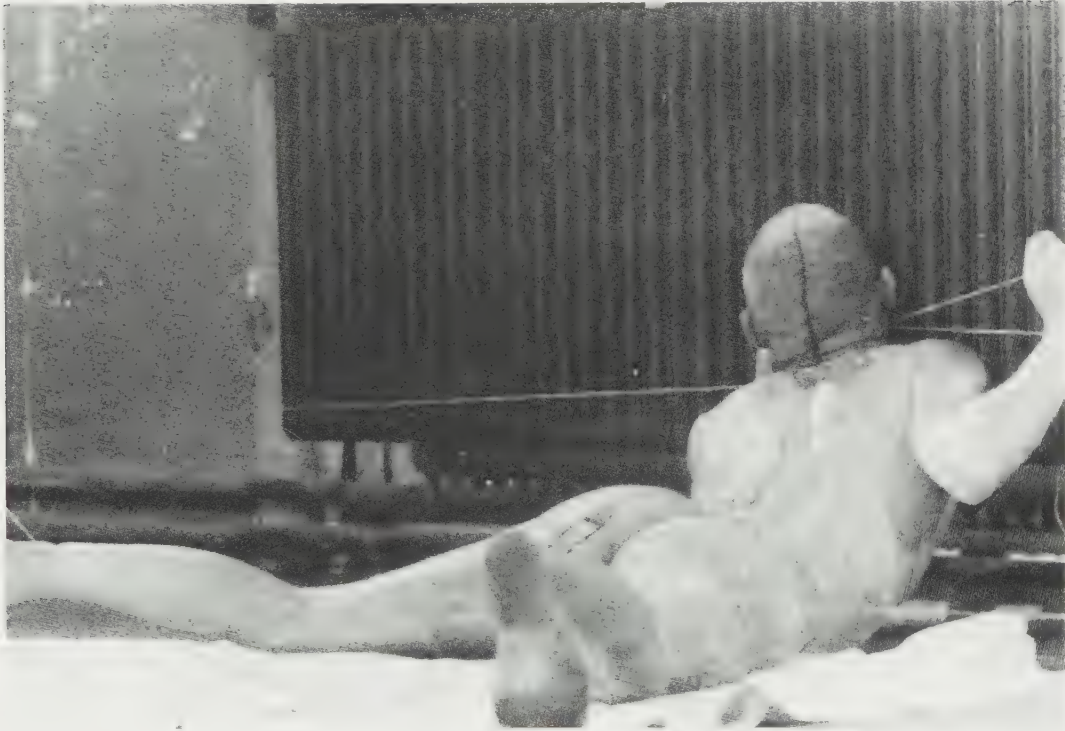
The film of *Action Stress Test* forms exactly the kind of work which the Action Group always desired from their resistant filmic collaborators: a performance-document that follows the sequence of events with the maximum objectivity, closely pursuing and transmitting Brus' action and its intentions. Brus, initially dressed in stockings and suspenders and a pair of male underpants, then naked, lacerates himself on the thigh and head, performs the act of pulling apart his flesh with lines of string, drinks his own urine, moves painfully with his feet in small buckets, and finally convulses on the ground, screaming, before wryly shaking his head and breaking off the action. The experimentation of Kren and Schmidt Jr, with its strategic transformation of the action into the arena of film, is entirely absent in the recording of Brus' movements. The film, shot anonymously by the cameraman Werner Schulz, in colour with sound recorded directly in the performance space, lasts for fifteen minutes.



cut down from the thirty minutes of Brus' action (half of the action having vanished in inept editing and film-reel changes), but even in its abbreviation, the film intimately allies itself with the intensity of Brus' acts and gestures. Whereas Schmidt Jr had lost the vital moments of laceration in Brus' *Art And Revolution* action through the poverty of his filmmaking, the film of *Action Stress Test* views those acts assiduously, zooming into Brus' hand as it razors his own thigh and skull, and meticulously collecting the trajectories of blood which run from the wounds. Occasionally, the handheld film-camera (filming from a position at the rear of the seating tier) is blocked by a moving spectator's head in its field of vision – accentuating the film's



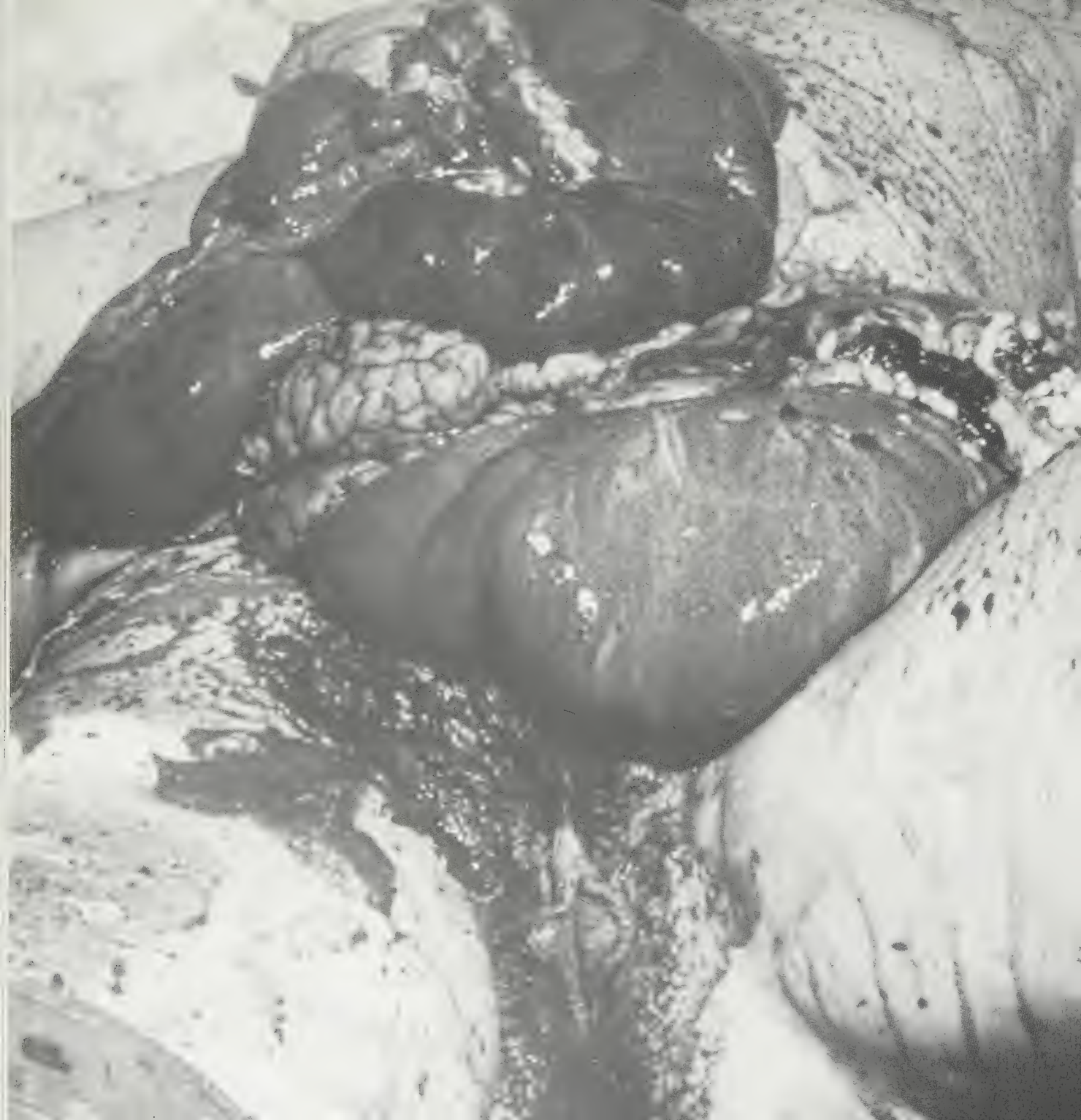
impression of veracity and documentary spontaneity – but otherwise it intently tracks Brus' body from the opening of his action to its abandonment. The film as document scans but never penetrates that damaged body: the images of wounding are wrenched by Brus directly from his body into the film-camera's own aperture. The body inflicts its own exacting damagings upon celluloid, focusing that film at the rips in skin and upon the lines of blood that exude from that body. Brus repeatedly twists himself headlong to one side in order to



avert or refuse the performance space where his body's dereliction is being enacted, but the film-camera always tracks with it and registers its aberrations. Finally, having obliterated its own time of performance, Brus' body pulls itself back from the performance-space's periphery to directly confront its audience and the film-camera a final time, wildly spasming on the ground until it is too damaged to continue, and forces an end to film to coincide with its own extinguishment.

Action Stress Test remains a document of the extremes of the body, despite its own absence as a film: it holds Brus' razored woundings, his screams and cries, his murmurings and outbursts,

together with the pouring-out from the body of its blood and urine. Those extremes are achieved (and filmed) through the rigorous conception and preparation by Brus of the action as a framework for corporeal interrogation: the unforeseen voids, destructions and seisms of the action itself emerge directly from the discipline that impels it. In its solitude, Brus' body is relentlessly driven towards its extreme end: his action is simultaneously directed against the body, against the society that condemned that body, and also against the forms of representation (including that of cinema) which seize and potentially deform that action. Brus' final exit from film – irresistibly carrying the work of the Action Group along with him, in that departure's terminal disintegration – extracts the body abruptly from the space and time of performance. Brus' subsequent transition from the corporeal experiments of his actions into the visual and poetic experiments of his drawings formed an overwhelming crash, for film as well as for his own body. From that point onwards, Brus' work – with its newly-accentuated concern with aberrant sex as the force whose gestures splinter representation – is undertaken privately, and tested purely on the image, though still always compulsively excavating the debris of the body in the form of that image.



BLOOD ORGIES AND ART PORNOGRAPHY

The many films made of the work of Hermann Nitsch and his long-term Orgies Mysteries Theatre project form documents in the same idiom as the unique film of Brus' *Action Stress Test*, and with parallel intentions: each document attempts to encapsulate the action and its trajectories of blood and corporeal debris with the maximum veracity (impeded only by unforeseen factors of movement on the part of Nitsch's figures or spectators), and to erase its own presence and filmic style as a medium of representation; such documents are the antithesis of the intricate filmic experimentations undertaken by Kren and Schmidt Jr in the 1960s. The films of Nitsch's actions extend both across time and duration – across over forty years of now-historical filmic documentation and, in the case of Nitsch's extended actions such as the six-day performance which culminated his work in August 1998, across the time-span of works which only the innovation of digital video allowed to be documented in their entirety. Nitsch's actions were filmed from 1962; although he was in some ways the Action Group artist most resistant to film – Nitsch possessed an abhorrence of technology which engulfed even those media which disseminated his work – he himself occasionally filmed his actions in the mid-1960s, and his 18th *Action* from 1966 was filmed by his then-

wife, Eva Nitsch. In 1967, documentary cameramen from the Austrian national television channel filmed a professional-quality record of a specially-staged action by Nitsch (the film was banned by the television station and not transmitted, though the document survived), and Nitsch continues to have his actions filmed in their contemporary form: his action at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London in 2002 was filmed via several handheld digital cameras, and a number of digitalised documents of Nitsch's performances appear on the website devoted to his work.¹³

The pivotal rapport between Nitsch's actions and film is that carried by blood as the medium which orgiastically swamps or interlocks with the medium of film. Nitsch's actions always constituted their ritual excess and its sheer duration as the sustaining power for his own life (without the action, there remains only death, which itself irresistibly feeds back into the action), together with his work and the representation of that work. In Nitsch's actions, blood is projected as an orgiastic power which assumes the form of excess in the action – that excess is then imparted directly to the body through the pouring by the bucketful of animal blood and intestinal matter over the bodies of Nitsch's human figures (with that excessive, gestural pouring exacerbated by the pervasive resonance of a sexual act which accompanies it). Blood's orgiastic power issues from a seminal rip in both corporeal and filmic surfaces: in the performance, that powerful rip issues from the wound which ends an animal's life in the performance space (or before the performance starts), and is then transferable, in its inflicted or surrendered power of life, to the human body over which the blood is thrown; in film, that rip is marked within the spectator's perception (the ritual must forcibly tear away the spectator from habitual modes of perception, in order to return that intensively transformed

13. Nitsch's website:
www.nitsch.org

perception to life). But the impact of blood in Nitsch's performances possesses its gratuitous power too: the flow of blood over the body is uncontrollable, subject to a multiplicity of chance movements that all carry their own gestures of capricious power. In the ocular field, blood holds a powerfully glaring colour, particularly at the instant of its collision with the human body and the rendering of that collision in the colour film-image or photographic-image. Blood is a power that can be multiplied infinitely within the duration of Nitsch's actions, and its manifestations infinitely mixed, with semen, excrement and urine (and inter-mixed too between animal blood and human blood), until the orgiastic flow of blood invades the entire performance space and thereby confronts both the eye of the spectator and the lens of the recording camera, as an irremediable disruption of vision. In Nitsch's actions, blood clots the eye and floods the nerves, in ecstasy or fear, so that every sense becomes vulnerable for seizure and the maximum velocity of unease or elation is reached; the body (provided it is immersed entirely within or upon the action) is then impelled into oblivion, orgasm or horror. Blood, in its mysterious profusion and cleansing, forms an ultimate instrument of healing for Nitsch – though that healing is always violently imprinted, seared and then instantaneously wiped-away in order to be reconstituted with the next action. The subordinated role of film in the documentation of Nitsch's actions must then be to collect the power of blood as an integral element of his rituals of transmission, and to form the celluloid surface or digital zone which holds woundings that are simultaneously enacted upon the body. While blood glows from colour film, in the 1960s it coagulated thickly and fragmentarily on the black-and-white films shot of Nitsch's actions. Blood itself generates an intricate screen of imageries over the body, upon which film then acts; film is so closely allied to the form and duration of performance

in the documentation of Nitsch's actions, that it takes on its own corporeal form, meshed – pre-eminently via the adhesive medium of blood – with the body in performance.

Nitsch's work was often perceived internationally in the late 1960s as carrying the provocation and corporeal excess of film pornography as well as exerting a radical anti-social and aesthetic charge. In media reports of Nitsch's performances in the United States in 1970 (the same year that the actions of Brus and Muehl were reaching their own extreme points), his notoriety was aligned with that of the countercultural movements whose protests against the Vietnam war were then developing from peaceful dissent to violent confrontation. At the same time, Nitsch's outrages were viewed in the framework of the worldwide theatrical innovations of the period – most notoriously, those of Julian Beck's Living Theatre company, which protested against corporeal and governmental restrictions in such spectacles as *Paradise Now!* and incorporated unsimulated sex acts – including those with spectators – into their chaotic performances, often broken-up by the police as the participants insurged into the volatile urban space outside the theatre (Julian Beck admired Nitsch's work and, at the end of his life, in his final notebooks, viewed his actions as having even surpassed Antonin Artaud's projects): many experimental theatre companies of the period, such as those of Alessandro Jodorowsky in Mexico and Shuji Terayama in Japan, also staged events which involved the slaughter on stage of live animals. Like the work of Muehl, as it entered its final public phase around 1970, Nitsch's performances locked into the intensive sexual furores of the period – and into the suppression or rejection of those acts as criminally or aberrantly pornographic. Sex, during that period, formed an essential focus for artistic resistance to authoritarian social structures – and the

extension of that sexual activity into the field of what was arbitrarily viewed or defined as pornography often became an intentional, strategic initiative on the part of its perpetrators, who conceived of their work as an essential part of a revolutionary or countercultural movement. Any action which resolutely shattered the body's boundaries, and unleashed internal corporeal materials and fluids before the spectator's eye, irresistibly formed part of the tumultuous culture of sex and art, and of pornography and enforced repression, of that moment.

The films of the Vienna Action Group – both the film-documents that recorded Nitsch's frenzies of bloodshed and sexual organs, and the 1960s experiments of Kren and Schmidt Jr which fragmented and dislocated sexual acts and self-lacerations by transforming them into autonomous film images – form seminal puncture-points in the development of film pornography from the 1960s to the present. Pornography took two pathways over those decades: industrial pornography developed into a colossal corporate organization, disseminating its products (innumerable anal penetrations, countless acts of fellation, incalculable amounts of expended semen) via a worldwide regime of pornography-cinemas showing celluloid films, then through the media of home-video and digitalised computer-pornography. No industrial film-genre displayed greater resilience and mutability than that of pornography; even filmmakers with spiritual preoccupations have emphasized the enduring physical impact of pornography within the engulfing banality of corporate media cultures – the German filmmaker Werner Herzog, for example, described a night of watching excruciatingly homogenized television: 'But then at 4am I found some hard-core porno, and I sat up and said to myself: "My God, finally something straightforward, something real, even if it is purely physical." For me

the porno had real naked truth.¹⁴ Running at a deviant tangent to that linear history of industrial pornography, a more subterranean, resistant and contrary form of film-pornography developed from the 1960s, drawing from the extreme aberrations of art as well as from anti-social strategies of provocation and from the desire to explore and capture sexual acts (such as those of torture, excretion, self-mutilation and fetishism) that had been largely excluded from industrial pornography. That lineage, with its filmic amalgam of invented and documentary elements, has its multiple sources in the diverse work of filmmakers such as Kenneth Anger and Jean Genet as well as Kurt Kren, and has produced an aberrant body of work whose contemporary manifestations include such works as Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi's 2000 film *Baise-moi* and Gaspar Noé's 2002 film *Irreversible* – a style of film-pornography that remains tenaciously experimental in its outrages as well as visceral and revelatory, and which sets the entire conception and definition of pornography into permanent, resistant flux. The forms of pornography have also been an increasingly prominent obsession in the field of contemporary art, with artists worldwide using explicit images of sexual acts and woundings, of excrement and urine, in film, photographic and digital media. But no artist or filmmaker has ever generated imageries intended or viewed as pornographic while operating under such a profound level of authoritarian social persecution as that experienced in the late 1960s by the Vienna Action Group, whose work was always created outside – and at an aggressive tangent to – the defusing art-market arena which now promotes replicated, near-industrialized art-pornography.

14. Herzog, in Herzog On Herzog (ed. Paul Cronin), Faber and Faber, London, 2002, p.239

SEVENTEEN SEX AND THE ART OF DESTRUCTION

In the work of the Action Group, the art of destruction forms a pre-eminent strategy that encompasses and transforms the body, the performance, and the film that confronts that performance; it also expands corrosively, with destructive intent upon the forms of the city and the society that surround the action. Although that pre-eminence of destruction exists in a uniquely intensified condition in the work of the Action Group, the art of destruction constitutes a pervasive force across all creative media, particularly in the 1960s. Without the exertion or onset of destruction, all art-works submerge into banality and fabrication; the accumulating presence of death is embedded in the very origins of art, just as it is in the origins of film. Destruction multiplies into many forms in the work of the Action Group: as an assault upon art and its representation, as a radical fragmentation of the human body and its internal components, and as a caustic interrogation of history and the contemporary manifestations of its scars. Above all, among the elements of the Action Group's creative weaponry, sex functions destructively in that work. Necessarily, the impetus of destruction is short-lived, and imbued with death in all of its gestures: its extension immediately leads into catastrophe (as in Schwarzkogler's acts) or into ever-expanding grandiose ambitions.

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1960s); at a certain point, that sexual momentum breaks and disintegrates, and there remains no more 'performance' of sex; instead, sex mutates a final time at that curtailment, and melts down into pure destruction.

Artists and writers throughout the postwar period used strategies of destruction to assemble their work, or generated imageries of destruction itself, from William Burroughs' cut-ups and shotgun-blasted paintings to Artaud's drawings of autopsied human faces and manifestoes of social decimation; in that vast body of destructive art, the motivations for destruction were as contrary and multiple as the strategies at work to execute destruction. The intention to destroy often involved a prolonged period of reflection and conception before the carrying-through of the act which instantly annulled whatever had been created. Art-works could also be imbued with their own self-destructive forms (in order to disintegrate or vanish over a particular span of time) or even be negated before the very first creative gesture, as in the work of the London-based artist Gustav Metzger (who devised the 'Destruction in Art Symposium', attended by Muehl, Nitsch, Brus and Kren, held in London in September 1966). The imposition of destruction constitutes a crucial power that can omnisciently traverse and cancel the space and time of any art-forms, from film and performance through to those of more intangible art-forms, such as digital-media; the art of destruction can also effortlessly imbue the structures and layers of corporeal forms with its wounds and impacts, as well as the surfaces or screens of art-works. The unique power of destruction exerted by the Action Group emerged from their determination to deploy the entirety of their actions' impact into the open interrogation and disintegration of those corporeal layers.

The preoccupation with the destruction of the body is

THE ART OF DESTRUCTION ▽ VIENNA ACTIONIST CINEMA

essentially linked to the preoccupation with upheaval or revolution which activated many of the Action Group's works (and those of their contemporaries). The collision between those two seminal creative obsessions can take many forms. Pre-eminently, the artist's body insurges destructively when society stultifies and suppresses it: the body tests out its own strategies of destruction on itself and on its collaborators' bodies to gauge their level of efficacy. Those interrogations of the body need to be represented or recorded, but the conflagratory impetus of destruction can extend too to the process of representation, so that a deep fissuration occurs both within the body of the artist (and of the artist's collaborators) and also within the visual medium that seizes that destruction (as in Kren's films, with their extreme fragmentation into autonomous shots and their intricately damaged celluloid). In the work of the Action Group, both the performance and the film hold and project the destruction of the body within their own forms. At moments of unbearable social upheaval or suppression, the body becomes a seminal compulsion that endlessly bifurcates into concerns with sex or death: either pathway may then mutate under intensive corporeal pressure into obsessions with revolution and destruction. Those obsessions require a spatial and visual materialization whose destructive focus is always that of the body. Under the sway of the art of destruction, the internal structure of that body rips and its contents emerge, expelled, before the eyes of their spectator: the preoccupation with the body then forms a void that must probe or attack itself relentlessly, until it achieves a terminal disintegration. In the work of the Action Group, that process of disintegration took the particular forms of imprisonment, exile and death, while simultaneously generating renewed spaces of obsession (all of them still destruction-accented spaces), in the forms of Brus' drawings and of Nitsch and Muehl's

innovation of sustained communities for their work.

While the body forms the primary target for the art of destruction, the motivation for that destruction may have specific sources in the history of urban or human destruction. The location of Vienna as the site of the Action Group's work forms a contrary source for that force of destruction – the entire history of Central Europe is one of forcible displacement of populations to peripheral areas, of massacres and warfare, while Vienna itself historically formed a locus of conservative repression and stultification within that destructive turmoil. In Muehl's work, much of the impetus for his assaults emerged through his memory of participation in the Second World War and his experience of slaughter on a vast scale: a memory needing both to be transmitted to the contemporary moment in the form of his actions, and also transformed to meet the resistant imperatives of that moment. The origins for Brus' self-lacerations emerged as an integral element of his conflicts with the authoritarian political system of Austria, at a time when the history of the human body still hung at a hair's-breadth between that of masses of bodies heaped for incineration in concentration-camps and that of bodies heaped for orgiastic sex acts within the 1960s countercultures. Even the imageries of blood-sodden bodies filmed in ill-lit cellars (notoriously the subterranean spaces of torture in all oppressive regimes) located the Action Group's work and its own strategies of destruction firmly within the twentieth century's history as one of relentless massacre and expulsion (the twentieth century's unique distinguishing feature being its determined momentum downwards, into acts of mass-slaughter); the Action Group generated spaces in which both ecstasy and screams of refusal were engendered by the destruction of flesh. In the Action Group's work, history itself finally constitutes a power that must be aggressively beaten and eviscerated.

via the medium of the human body, so that the memory of totalitarian power remains unscreened. Memory, too, needs to be beaten alive to the extreme point of destruction so that it remains searingly attentive; otherwise, an ineradicable void of memory floods into history, with all of its oblivious bliss.

The residue of all of those forces of destruction, in the Action Group's work, remains contained in the films of their performances. Since the films themselves bear the intricate marks of destruction – and numerous films of the Action Group's work have vanished over time, either through intentional destruction or accidental loss – they form the sensitized counterpart to the destructive intentions (with their multiple sources) exacted within those actions. Many performance artists of the period disengaged entirely from film as a medium for their work; notably, Joseph Beuys refused film, arguing that he simply mis-recognized its imageries. The Action Group's work is uniquely rendered in film, primarily through the artists' collaboration with filmmakers such as Kren who exhibited an intimate knowledge and engagement of their own with destruction. Even as destroyed projections of destroyed actions, those films still insistently transmit the art of destruction.

THE DETRITUS OF THE VIENNA ACTION GROUP AND CONTEMPORARY ART

The rapport of the Action Group's work to contemporary art and film is that of a virulent body of detritus that incessantly incites, provokes and interrogates contemporary practitioners: at the same time, the work of the Action Group forms such an extreme mass of material that it instantly annuls the habitual banalities and repetitions of performance art from their first moment, and is always present – as a kind of severe initiatory test – within the generation of whatever rare corporeal work, in performance or film, is now original in its conception and execution. The work of the Action Group, and its residue in film or photography, in no way comprises a set of direct influences on contemporary art (or on the urban space of Vienna as a creative site) – rather, from its temporal position in the 1960s, it exacts a pervasive, insidious infiltration into the art and film of the contemporary moment. In the same way, the films of Kurt Kren and Ernst Schmidt Jr formed an often-adverse and disrupting infiltration that penetrated pervasively into the actions which the filmmakers focused upon; Kren's work, too, operates as a subterranean and awry source of inspiration for every contemporary experimental filmmaker or digital artist whose work concerns itself with the gestural, transforming or vanishing forms of the human body and their

confrontational rapport of representation with the visual image. And in many ways, the contemporary form of the Action Group's work literally constitutes a detritus, in the medium of the scattering of damaged films that survive of their performances, and also in the artworks created by the artists themselves (particularly Nitsch, Muehl and Brus) from the remnants and debris of their unique, ephemeral actions, in the form of two-dimensional works on canvas demonstrating the shattered objects and accumulations of blood-soaked materials left behind by those actions. Over the subsequent decades, Nitsch in particular consolidated this detritus, extending it into the form of vast paintings (often intended explicitly for exhibition in art-museums, in large-scale exhibitions) that evoked and spatially magnified the gestural furore and ritual intensity of his actions.

In the 1960s, the work of the Action Group had formed part of an international movement of innovative, socially-corrosive art that examined the forms of the body and disassembled the then-petrified structures and perceptions of art; although the Action Group artists' works were often viewed as obscene and unacceptable even within the wide framework of 1960s experimentations, the invitations they received to participate in international gatherings such as the London 'Destruction in Art Symposium' in 1966 demonstrate the international impact which their activities had already begun to gather by that time. The Action Group's work exerted its international influence on artists working far beyond the medium of performance art, encompassing the work of choreographers, writers and experimental filmmakers. Vienna was a highly isolated city in the context of the groundbreaking art of that period, which focused especially on centres in Frankfurt, London, New York and Tokyo; the Action Group operated within a hostile urban environment, and the media assaults and legal harassments of their work were largely

supported by Vienna's population (and also by many of the city's other artists), who were relieved to see the Action Group dispersed into exile or death at the end of the 1960s. The Action Group had to look beyond Austria for their alliances and their own sources of inspiration, although their engagement with the work of the Austrian artist Arnulf Rainer (already internationally-renowned by the early 1960s, and a decade older than all of the Action Group artists apart from Muehl) imparted a degree of consolidation and validation to their work. Rainer's own work had a particular preoccupation with the representation of the body and its extreme boundaries, with one of its primary sources in the projects of the art-therapist Leo Navratil, who was working at the Lower Austria Mental Hospital throughout the 1960s to create a special centre (finally opened in 1981) to house a group of psychotic or traumatized artists, such as Johann Hauser and August Walla, many of whom had been incarcerated since the end of the Second World War; their figurative images of obsessively disintegrated, sexualized bodies would eventually form an intimately shattered counterpart to those of the Action Group.

The contemporary influence exerted by the imageries, icons and manifestoes of the Action Group remains incalculably vast, extending powerfully across every medium, but is also impossible to align exactly with the work of artists who (by definition) often view their own work as unprecedented in its extreme explorations; that influence operates more as a vital incitation for ever-deeper corporeal interrogations rather than as a system to be replicated (the Action Group's work enduringly precludes such an option). The work of the American artist Ron Athey resonates with that of the Action Group in its spectacles of multiple laceration, staged with a uniquely ritualised dimension and a caustic preoccupation with religious fundamentalism. The British artist Hayley Newman's work explores

the mutable representation of corporeal performance via the elaborately-fabricated documentation of actions that exist only as invented apparitions; that work demonstrates a probing of the tension between the body and its representation that connects into the concerns of the Action Group (and their filmic collaborators, such as Kren) with the profound rip that lies between the action and its traces. The Italian artist Franko B undertakes intricately-choreographed catwalk-style performances in which inflicted wounds gradually expel his body's content of blood onto surfaces arranged on the floor, across the performance's duration. Franko B has spoken of his performances, such as *Aktion 398*, as forming explicit 'tributes' (even in their titles) to the Action Group; he exhibits the bloodied detritus (in such forms as baby-wipes) of his performances as the components for subsequent two-dimensional works, as did Muehl, Brus, and Nitsch (who notably used sanitary-towels among his own pictorial elements). Franko B's work exists in tension with the corporate, mediatized art-culture that works to immediately engulf and banalize contemporary performance and its representation; that work operates, too, at an infinite distance from the system of far rarer social confrontation and impending incarceration under which the Action Group existed. Even so, his formulation of the aims of his work projects an individual engagement with a near-identical terrain to that of the Action Group: 'My work focuses on the visceral, where the body is a canvas and an unmediated site for representation of the sacred, the beautiful, the untouchable, the unspeakable and for the pain, the love, the hate, the loss, the power and the fears of the human condition.'¹⁵ Finally, the widespread contemporary impact of the Action Group's work forms an unquantifiable but irrevocable source for projects of resistant social annulment and intensive corporeal excavation.

15. Franko B, artist's statement, London, March 2003

The contemporary topographic and sensory space of Vienna itself has been transformed in many ways since the 1960s, when the Action Group used the city as the arena for their performances. However, some crucial elements of the city remain identical with the moment at which the films and photographs of the Action Group's work recorded their surfaces, such as the central district of palace-buildings and alleyways traversed by Brus in his 1965 *Action Vienna Walk*. The totalitarian imperative underlying the city (unwelcomely berated with derision by the Action Group), with its urban axis in the Neue Hofburg palace balcony from which Hitler announced his annexation of Austria in 1938, also remains strongly marked in the framework of the country's enduring neo-fascist mainstream political presence. By contrast, the stultified and war-damaged population of 1960s Vienna has largely disappeared, along with the intense creative furore of the time with its spectacular imageries of the human body in excremental provocation. The city's now-dominant mediatized culture, transmitted via its digital-image screens, focuses its power on areas away from the peripheral urban zones where the Action Group staged their 1960s cellar-actions: those sites are now occupied by other despised inhabitants (migrant workers and prostitutes exiled within Vienna from the poverty-stricken countries of Eastern Europe, whereas the Action Group's exile propelled them away from Vienna). The contemporary city is marked too by the total absence within it of the Action Group artists themselves (with the exception of Schwarzkogler, interred in the Vienna city cemetery): Nitsch in his Prinzendorf castle to the north of Vienna, Brus in Graz, and Muehl in Portugal. But alongside that absence, the visual traces of the Action Group's work contrarily possess a prominent new presence in the city through their visibility in the galleries of Vienna's newly-constructed art-museum complexes; that work now deploys its concentrated

impact of self-lacerated bloodshed and sexual aberration pre-eminently upon the city's young inhabitants and visiting groups of schoolchildren.

The work of the Vienna Action Group now forms an active detritus with the enduring potential to overturn and transform whatever it comes into contact with. The Action Group generated a core of adamant social refusal, with its focus in the body's determinedly expelled elements: semen, excrement, urine and blood. The role of film in that work, in the experimental projects of Kren and Schmidt Jr. was always to amass and then autonomously reactivate the visual debris left behind by irreplicable actions that disintegrated and vanished instantly at their moment of maximal intensity; film then served to irreparably compact together its own imageries with the material of the insurgent body. While Muehl, Brus, Nitsch and Schwarzkogler performed their anatomisations of the body, Kren and Schmidt Jr conducted their own acts of anatomy into the material of film: the intimate confrontation of those two strategies created unique, seminal works. The films of the Action Group reveal both the compelling corporeal matter interrogated by those artists' work, together with that moment's vital innovations in experimental film.

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This is an essential bibliography of books and catalogues on the Vienna Action Group. A number of the exhaustive catalogues of the artists' work, such as the outstanding volumes by Hubert Klocker, include English-language translations of essays; the volume of English-language translations of manifestoes and other texts, edited by Malcolm Green, is also invaluable. Numerous other books around the work of the Action Group, particularly by or about Hermann Nitsch and Günter Brus, also exist; the intention of this assembling of sources is primarily to indicate further material for readers exploring the links between performance art and other media, especially film.

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NOTES

- ¹ Brus, in *Limite du visible: Günter Brus*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1993, p.102-3 (translated from the French)
- ² *ibid*, p.95
- ³ *ibid*, p.98
- ⁴ *ibid*, p.115
- ⁵ Nitsch, interviewed by Hayley Newman, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 19 April 2002
- ⁶ Nitsch, *Fleisch/Blut/Farbe*, speech at the Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna, 24 February 1992
- ⁷ Kristine Stiles, 'Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions', in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949-1979*, edited by Paul Schimmel, Thames and Hudson, New York/London, 1998, p.293 (Stiles based her account on a 1978 interview with Edith Adam, who has since died)
- ⁸ Linda Bilda, *Ernst Schmidt Jr: Drehen Sie Filme, aber Keine Filme!*, Secession/Triton Verlag, Vienna, 2001, p.38
- ⁹ *ibid*, p.98
- ¹⁰ Malcolm Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond*, Studio Vista, London, 1977, p.102
- ¹¹ Brus, invitation-text for *Action Stress Test*, in Elisabeth Jappe, *Performance, Ritual, Prozess: Handbuch der Aktionkunst in Europa*, Prestel, Munich, 1993, pp.78-9
- ¹² Brus, in *Limite du visible: Günter Brus*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1993, p.102 (translated from the French)
- ¹³ Nitsch's website: www.nitsch.org
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- ¹⁵ Franko B, artist's statement, London, March 2003



FILMOGRAPHY

This is a list of films documenting the work of the Vienna Action Group, or with a close connection to that work, filmed from 1962-70; many of the films were made by the artists themselves, often in collaboration with other artist-filmmakers, or simply with friends able to operate a film camera (the division of work is often impossible to ascertain). This list is intended to be an essential filmography rather than an exhaustive one; notably, numerous films from the period have vanished or been destroyed in the intervening decades. Films are listed by filmmakers, with English-language translations of the original German titles (in the majority of cases, the titles' translations into English were devised by Hubert Klocker); in the few cases where a film possesses distinctive 'narrative' elements, a brief synopsis is given.

Peter Gorsen

Psycho-Drama (film of Günter Brus), 1970, 5 minutes

Bert Gruber

Painting Action (by Hermann Nitsch), 1962, 15 minutes

Peter Jurkowitsch

13th Action (of Hermann Nitsch), 16 September 1965, 16 minutes

Kurt Kren

(The titles of Kren's films were habitually numbered according to their chronological order and the year in which they were made. Kren produced a vast body of work unconnected to the concerns of the Vienna Action Group, extending both before and after his collaborations with them.)

Ana, 1964, 3 minutes

Leda And The Swan, 1964, 3 minutes



Body Analysis 1



Body Analysis 1

Money and Paper, 1964, 4 minutes

Christmas Eve, 1964, 4 minutes

Back Street New Year's Christmas Greetings, 1965, 2 minutes

Self-Mutilation, 1965, 5 minutes

Star, 1965, 2 minutes

Christmas Eve, 1965, 4 minutes

Some Film, 1967, 4 minutes

Some Film, 1967, 5 minutes

Kurt Kren with Günter Brus

20 September 1967: The Eating, Drinking, Pissing and Shitting Film, 1967, 7 minutes

Helmut Kronberger

Direct Art Festival (film of Günter Brus), 1967

Pullover/Osmosis/Inhale-Exhale (three films of Günter Brus), 1967

Merseburger

Intelligence Test, 1969

Body Analysis 1, 1969

Otto Muehl

Penisaktion, 1965, 4 minutes

Tetanus (with Günter Brus), 1965

Transfusion (with Günter Brus), 1965

Apollo 10, 1969, 14 minutes

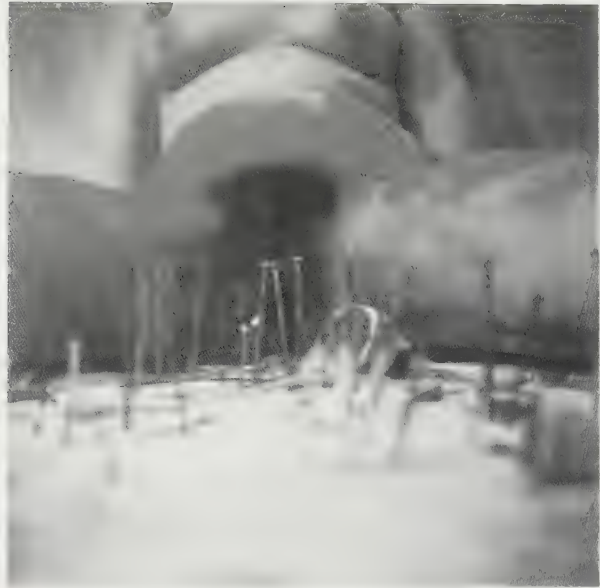
Silent Night, 1969



Tetanus

Otto Muehl with Hermann Jauk

O Sensibility, 1970, 16 minutes



Transfusion

Muehl's most notorious film opens with a sequence of Muehl and his performers grimacing, dancing, contorting and staging sex acts; a female performer sucks the beak of a large goose; Muehl caresses the goose and licks its head; the goose's body and head are rubbed against the sexual organs of male and female performers; the female performer whips Muehl with a belt, then he whips her; the woman fellates another male performer and is simultaneously sodomized by a further male performer, while Muehl presses the goose between his own body and that of the woman; Muehl administers an enema to a second female performer while she fellates him; the goose is decapitated, above the body of the first



O Sensibility

female performer, by one of the male performers (not by Muehl himself); blood drenches the woman's body; Muehl inserts the severed neck of the goose into the woman's vagina and masturbates her with it; the goose's decapitated head is rolled across the woman's body; Muehl whips the bodies of all of the performers, who disintegrate into a chaotic mass; Muehl drinks the last spurts of blood from the goose's neck, which

he holds above his mouth.

The Death Of Sharon Tate, 1969



The Death Of Sharon Tate

Otto Muehl with Kurt Kren

SS And Star Of David, 1970, 7 minutes

The Wanton Wotan, 1970, 8 minutes



SS And Star Of David



Shit-Bastard

Otto Muehl with Kurt Kren and Hermann Jauk
Shit-Bastard, 1969, 11 minutes

In this film (titled *Scheisskerl* in the original German), Muehl had not originally intended to take a role himself, but when one of the planned participants withdrew, fearing arrest, Muehl regarded himself as being duty-bound to appear in the film himself. In the first sequence of the film, Kren is seen naked, except for a minuscule pinafore, serving a large cream cake to a woman in a badly-lit apartment; the woman eats the cake greedily; a fragment of a text by Georges Bataille is shown; a second woman licks the first woman's anus, then carefully administers an enema; Muehl lies naked on a bed with the first woman's anus above his head; long spurts of liquid excrement (filmed in slow-motion) cover Muehl's body and face; the second

woman feeds handfuls of liquid excrement into the protesting Muehl's mouth, and smears the remainder across his body and penis, which she masturbates and then fellates; the first woman sits astride Muehl's penis and fucks him, while the second woman masturbates; Kren is seen sitting in a corner of the room, still in his pinafore; Kren stands up, staggers across the room and begins to clean it vigorously with a duster; Kren removes the remains of the cream cake and sits in the corner of the room with the duster in his lap.

Sodoma, 1969, 9 minutes

The film comprises sequences of sex acts and the administering of enemas, some of them shot outdoors, with Kren and Muehl as prominent participants.

Otto Muehl with Helmut Kronberger

Grimuid, 1967, 10 minutes

Zock Exercises (Cardinal, Michelangelo), 1967, 6 minutes

Zock Exercises (The Ear, La Dolorosa), 1967, 6 minutes

Otto Muehl with Rudolf Schwarzkogler

Action Vienna Walk (film of Günter Brus), 5 July 1965, 2 minutes

With Verve Into The New Year, 1967, 5 minutes

Otto Muehl with Spermint (also known as Dobrowitsch)

Amore, 1968, 3 minutes

Fountain, 1968, 6 minutes

Libi, 1968, 6 minutes

Shots of sex acts and of sexual organs are intercut with sequences from a Catholic religious ceremony filmed from a television set.



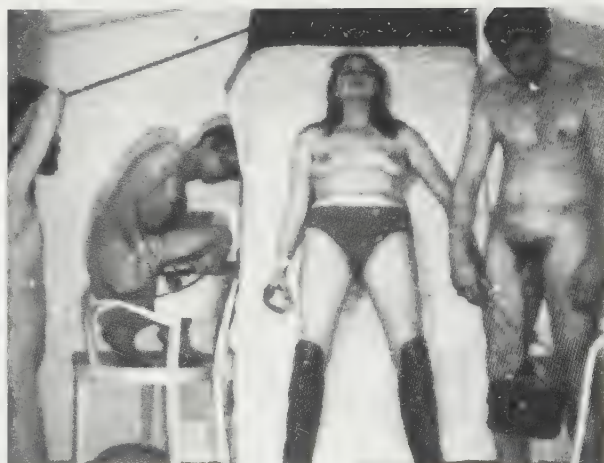
Amore



Libi

Satisfaction, 1968, 12 minutes

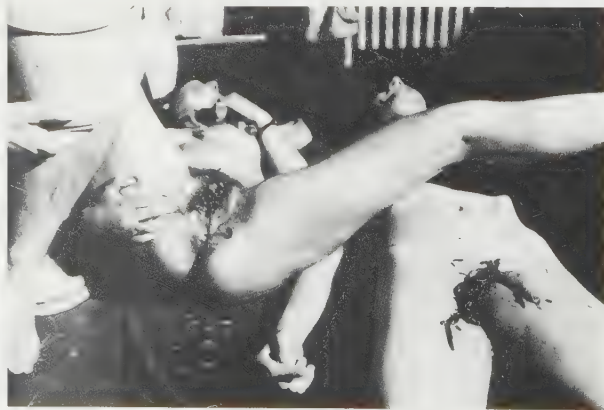
Apollo 11, 1969, 6 minutes



Satisfaction

Dirk Mülder with Otmar Bauer and Günter Brus

Impudence in Grunewald (film of Günter Brus), 1969, 12 minutes



Impudence In Grunewald

Eva Nitsch

18th Action (of Hermann Nitsch), 19 May 1966, 10 minutes

Hermann Nitsch

15th Action (of Hermann Nitsch), 10 October 1965, 10 minutes

ORF television crew

24th Action (of Hermann Nitsch), July 1967, 28 minutes

Ernst Schmidt Jr

(Like Kren, Schmidt Jr also produced a vast body of work unconnected to the concerns of the Vienna Action Group.)

Silver-arse, 1965

Bodybuilding, 1965-6, 9 minutes

Rumpsti-Pumpsti, 1965, 3 minutes

Bimmel Bammel, 1965

15 May 1966, 1966, 11 minutes

Art and Revolution, 1968, 2 minutes

Vienna Film 1896-1976, 1977, 117 minutes

Werner Schulz

Action Stress Test (film of Günter Brus), 1970, 15 minutes

Irm and Ed Sommer

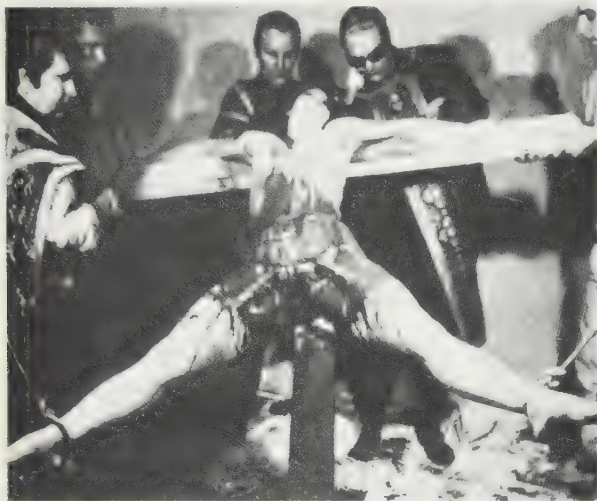
Maria-Conception Action (film of Hermann Nitsch), 1969, 15 minutes



Silver-arse



Rumpsti-Pumpsti



Maria-Conception Action

Hans-Christof Stenzel

Strangulation (film of Günter Brus), 1969, 6 minutes

Peter Weibel

2nd Total Action, 1966

Vietnam Party, 1966

Funebre, 1966, 7 minutes



Strangulation



Vietnam Party

Oswald Wiener

Flower Piece, 1969



Funebre

Feature Film:

Dusan Makavejev

Sweet Movie, 1974, 99 minutes

In his feature film, Makavejev includes a sequence of Muehl together with his commune members of the early 1970s; Muehl strongly disliked the film, commenting: 'It was all prescribed' (2002).

Documentary Films:

Madonna Benjamin

Slaves in Paradise, 1999, 55 minutes

In charting the development and disintegration of Muehl's commune, Benjamin's English-language documentary includes home-movie footage from the commune in the 1970s and 1980s, and numerous interviews with its members; the documentary concludes with a sequence shot at Muehl's new base in Portugal, following his release from incarceration in 1997.

Peter Weibel

Vienna Actionism, 1976, 88 minutes

Weibel's documentary, which he narrated himself, includes extracts from films by Kren and Muehl and discusses the dynamics of performance art in Vienna in the 1960s and early 1970s, emphasising his own contribution.



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The Vienna Action Group formed the most provocative, insurgent and challenging of all the worldwide art movements of the 1960s. Their sexually-charged and anti-social actions exacted a profound and irreparable upheaval in the way in which art was conceived. Using their own bodies as raw material, the Action Group undertook experiments in cruelty that disassembled the human body and its acts into compacted gestures of blood, meat and excreta.

The films of the Vienna Action Group – made both by the group themselves, and by collaborators such as Kurt Kren – form the essential residue, debris and evidence of their performances. Film forms the sensitized medium – as unique and ferocious in its impact as the corporeal material upon which the Action Group worked – that allied itself most intimately to their experiments. For the first time, this book focuses on those films as fully revealing the obsessions, ambitions and outrages of the Action Group.

The iconoclastic work of the Vienna Action Group is now more contemporary than ever before, and **THE ART OF DESTRUCTION** provides a comprehensive introduction to that work in both film and performance. Fully illustrated and annotated, this is a book of compelling interest to all students of film, art and performance, and for all readers engaged with questioning social and corporate cultures.

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