



Two stills from Henning Fehr and Philipp Rühr's *Die Desinfizierende Sonne* (The Disinfecting Sun), 2013, digital video, black-and-white, sound, 46 minutes 20 seconds.



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OPENINGS

Henning Fehr and Philipp Rühr

NICOLAS LINNERT

BETWEEN MAY '68 and the military-postindustrial complex, between Situationism and the Situation Room, the word *situation* may well appear depleted—a term that once held promises of utopian revolution now repurposed as the vacant, adjudicated language of bureaucracy and crisis. But the young Düsseldorf-based duo Henning Fehr and Philipp Rühr give the term new currency: They embrace “situations” as the thrust of their work. The noun is suggestive in this context not only because it aptly describes the varied episodes from contemporary urban life that are typically the focus of the artists’ films, but because its verb form, *situate*, refers to the active role played by cinematic processes themselves in framing and presenting content. This evocation of the agency of cultural technique in turn nods to the political undertones of Fehr and Rühr’s work, calling to mind the long-standing association of avant-garde cinema

with dialectics. Indeed, Sergei Eisenstein famously posited a resonance between the structure of dialectical thought and film editing, as if cuts and camera movements—the relations *between* shots rather than the individual shots themselves—could reveal multiple dimensions of a situation, synthesizing contradictory elements and achieving resolution through negation, just as in philosophical dialectics. Fehr and Rühr are of course not the first to revisit dialectical cinema; the avant-garde filmmakers of 1960s and '70s Western Europe self-consciously borrowed techniques of montage from 1920s Soviet film. And today, in a digital present wholly defined by montage, by copy-and-paste—from MTV to TMZ—the techniques elucidated by Eisenstein have been absorbed and normalized by the mainstream culture industry. But Fehr and Rühr’s return is also a pointedly contemporary update: While frankly appropri-

ating many of their techniques from the historical avant-garde, they have unraveled the structure of dialectical cinema’s underlying teleological narrative. In their work, negation, the root of dialectics, is swapped out for accumulation, pushing the recombinant logic of montage to a frenetic pace that denies any cathartic, synthesized resolution. Nowhere is this sophisticated interplay between content and technique more apparent than in Fehr and Rühr’s film *Die Desinfizierende Sonne* (The Disinfecting Sun), 2013, a forty-six-minute, black-and-white, largely silent rumination on a seemingly endless series of Düsseldorf storefronts. The work straddles still photography and cinema: Commercial facades, window displays, and brand logos are shown as frozen geometries within the camera frame, with the deadpan frontal views animated only by passing automobiles and pedestrians cruising or ambulating

into and out of view. Fehr and Rühr’s film positions its subjects in a kind of zombie state of suspended animation. It’s fitting, then, that of the film’s only two sequences with sound, one presents a wayward, meager-faced pedestrian, seemingly in conversation with someone just outside the frame, comparing his bony visage to a skull before darkly prophesying, “Actually, we are all skulls, only we don’t know it yet.” The death mask of cinema—that which records and therefore embalms, stops time—is here upended by near-invisible continuity editing, as scenarios shift according to a meandering chronology in an apparently endless raft of daylight, and characters stroll contentedly within a lifeless plot. Such seamless editing is an exception in Fehr and Rühr’s work, though; the artists often favor explicit and persistent evidence of cutting, assemblage, and repetition, as in their thesis for the Kunstakademie

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Fehr and Rühr push the recombinant logic of montage to a frenetic pace that denies any cathartic, synthesized resolution.



Danji Buck-Moore, Henning Fehr, and Philipp Rühr, *Polyrhythm Technoir Pt. I: Psycho Thrill Cologne*, 2014, digital video, color, sound, 34 minutes 24 seconds.

Düsseldorf, the 2014 film *The Production Line of Happiness*, which borrows its title from their professor Christopher Williams's touring retrospective and that show's accompanying catalogue. The nearly forty-one-minute film's audio track is an uninterrupted recording of a class discussion, played over unsynchronized footage documenting members of the class passively listening, some staring blankly. The discussion itself is broad and open ended: Topics range from the Vietnam War to antiglobalization movements to the sacredness of the individual to what a viable revolutionary strategy constitutes today. Interspersed are scenes from this past year's Art Cologne fair, shot with a standard zoom lens and variable focal lengths. Within these expansive views, one sees artworks—including, prominently, some by Williams and others by Fehr and Rühr. Over the past three decades, Williams and other pioneers of the

post-Pictures generation have become known for their unerringly critical meditations on the culture industry, as well as for their multifarious attempts to devalue the art object through strategies such as montage and appropriation. At the same time, such work is, today, quite institutionally and commercially successful. Fehr and Rühr investigate the fate of such critical practices, both as pupils and as fellow participants in an art fair, itself perhaps ground zero of late capitalism's own operations of montage and appropriation—and, ultimately, of object commodification.

Little wonder, then, that Fehr and Rühr's most recent project, *Polyrhythm Technoir*, 2014–, abandons the art world, looking elsewhere to find the political agency for which the art-student voices in *The Production Line of Happiness* seem to pine. The three-part work, a collaboration with musician and

sound artist Danji Buck-Moore, examines the past, present, and future of electronic dance music and allegorizes the electronic-music scene as yet another locus for late capitalism's techniques of sampling, repetition, and immersive, biopowered spectacle. *Psycho Thrill Cologne*, 2014, begins the trilogy with a nostalgia-tinged look at the ongoing eponymous Cologne techno party, founded in 1991 by Claus Bacher. In the artists' footage, bodies appear anonymously; individual egos are traded for tangled limbs undulating amid polychromatic light beams. The hazy glow blanketing the frame suggests the misty glow of memory. Grainy beats and found sounds supersede conversation, and the dance floor becomes the site of a utopian collectivity.

The second installment in the series, *Eine Endlose Zigarette* (An Endless Cigarette), 2014, finds a sharp contrast to this idealized free space in the nightclubs



Two stills from Danji Buck-Moore, Henning Fehr, and Philipp Rühr's *Polyrhythm Technoir Pt. III: The Rattle Snake: A Film About the Future* (work in progress), digital video, color, sound.

of present-day Berlin, where high production values seduce crowds of would-be partiers. While the first installment was conceived for the intimate setting of a small monitor, this film is meant to be projected in a theater, where the overwhelming scale of strobes and flickers links the space of cinema to the nightclub itself—each an outdated site of industrial entertainment. Some cuts show robotic rows of dancers, alluding to the preassigned seating arrangements that have rendered many of these clubs more like commercial music venues than like free-flowing underground spaces. Midway, the film centers on the lanky silhouette of a man, his arms and legs erratically tracing the beats. A pulsing spotlight delineates his jerking form, recalling Apple's iconic iPod marketing campaign, in which human silhouettes rock out against lurid computer-generated backgrounds. Meanwhile, field recordings of chemically induced chatter (“Do

you have this kind of music in California?” “It's the fucking best!”) puncture the film's industrial audio track. Altogether, the scenes evoke a solipsistic subjectivity, each individual passively submitting to the immersive audiovisual apparatus. *The Rattle Snake: A Film About the Future*, the trilogy's unfinished concluding film, examines techno's evolving role in Latin America, where it is (at least so far) less market driven and seems to hold out some promise of political action through its interweaving with a diverse range of other fields, from sustainable agriculture to sound architecture and a second wave of modern psychedelic research.

If dialectical cinema was born of an all-out attack on capitalism at a moment when socialism seemed poised for triumph, Fehr and Rühr propose a more equivocal approach grounded in the realities of everyday life under late capitalism. Dialectical cinema

strove for a transformation of reality itself and was as much about allegory and emotion—the violence of negation and the catharsis of synthesis—as about logical reflection. Fehr and Rühr, in contrast, hew more closely to the stuff of reality, accumulating snippets of lived experience that accrete without resolution. In this sense, their approach may be closer to what director Raúl Ruiz called “shamanic activity in cinema,” wherein the filmmaker is suspended between active participation and passive reflection, and narrative moments are neither unified in the space and time of reality nor fractured according to any dialectical hierarchy. Rather, filmic sequences become interchangeable or superimposed, paradigms combine or coexist, and cinema becomes a tool for revealing currently unattainable worlds that exist alongside our own. □

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Two stills from Danji Buck-Moore, Henning Fehr, and Philipp Rühr's *Polyrhythm Technoir Pt. II: Eine Endlose Zigarette* (An Endless Cigarette), 2014, digital video, color, sound, 53 minutes 8 seconds.



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