

# Super-8/Berlin

The architecture of division

## Acknowledgements

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October, 1983  
Keith J. Sanborn

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Film stills courtesy of the filmmakers

# Super-8/Berlin

The architecture of division

Films by

Axel Brand and  
Anette Maschmann

Brigitte Bühler

Christoph Doering

Die tödliche Doris

Antje Fels

Walter Gramming

Andrea Hillen

Knut Hoffmeister

Dieter Hormel

Thomas Kiesel

Horst Markgraf

Roza Spak

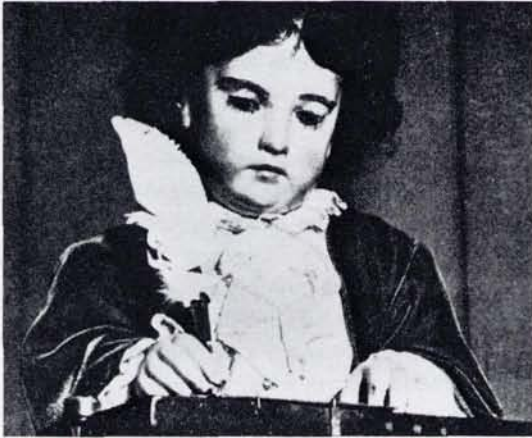
Monika Funke Stern

Teufelsbergproduktion

R.S. Wolkenstein

Yana Yo

**Super-8/Berlin**  
**The architecture of division**  
by Keith J. Sanborn



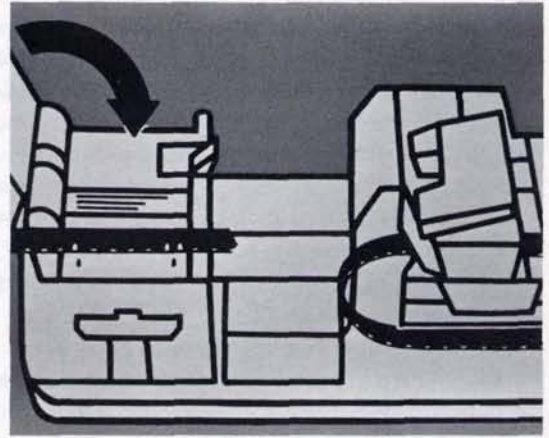
P. Jacquet-Droz, Automaton called  
"Young Writer"

**Instead of an introduction:  
the Super-8 question**

The present exhibition investigates a field of concerns which derive from a variety of sources. Principal among them are my own experience as a filmmaker and a desire to form a perspective on the interaction of aesthetic and political forces in the historical shifts in our culture of the past five years.

In the past five years in America, many of the significant departures from the tracks of the formal film of the 60's and 70's have come about in Super-8. And that, both in spite of, and because of the establishment of the network of regional media centers in this country. Super-8 is light, portable, relatively cheap; you can own your own camera, projector, and editing equipment without a bank loan, or a relative leaving you money in a will. You don't have to rely on what you can borrow from your local media center for a day or two. Super-8 is a format many can and do live with.

I had heard there was a great deal of activity in Germany in Super-8 and I had seen a few of the films, in Buffalo and in New York. I had heard stories about more, and above all about Berlin, the paradoxical center of German culture. I wanted to find out about the impact of Super-8 in Germany and about the sensibility of the current generation there. For Germany, at least in our current mythology, is our nearest cultural double. I narrowed



my field of investigation to the western half of the city of Berlin.

In late March of this year, I travelled to Berlin: to meet certain people, to show my films and perform, and to find out about Super-8 in Berlin, to gather films for this show.

Long before I left this country, I had been in contact through friends with one Berlin filmmaker, Yane Fehrenberg. She had shot an extraordinary film alone in Africa in Super-8. As a project it recalls Leni Riefenstahl's pursuit of Africa; in its realization it is more direct, intimate, and humane. Unfortunately, Yane's film remains incomplete and she declined to show it publicly in its current state. She did, however, put me in contact with other filmmakers, who, in turn, put me in contact with others.

Yane's African project was the beginning of my search, but I had received the benefit of assistance from Ingrid Scheib-Rothbarth in New York as well, in the form of program notes from two Berlin Super-8 festivals and some names and addresses.

Also in New York, I had heard of a Super-8 night at the Berlin Film Festival of two years ago, organized by Alf Bold, the Director of the Arsenal Kino. Through Yane and others I knew that the Arsenal was a center of independent film activity in Berlin. When I arrived in that city, it seemed only logical I should go there. I found Herr Bold to be an exemplary director. He possesses an acute historical sense and keeps himself well-informed

about current work on the edge of the edge of established film activity. He seems to know everyone and be everywhere at once. Herr Bold furnished me with a number of additional names and addresses of Super-8 filmmakers in Berlin, and again, they put me in contact with still others.

During the course of my four weeks of intensive film screenings in Berlin, I came to realize that Super-8 activity there has no center. It has, rather, a multiplicity of centers which can be connected only by imaginary lines.

Wherever and whenever I screened work in Berlin, I would try to ask: Why Super-8? I wasn't sure the question even had a meaning in this context. I was left feeling sometimes like Sam Spade, sometimes like Sigmund Freud, sometimes like Margaret Mead, and sometimes like just another filmmaker. When I could get an answer to the Super-8 question, it was nearly always the same: Super-8 was the only thing they could get their hands on — the only thing they could afford. And though recently there has been some aid to Super-8 filmmakers in the form of small grants and play at festivals like Oberhausen, practically no one I spoke with could afford 16mm, nor did they want to get involved.

When they do get their hands on some money, they go out and buy top-of-the-line equipment, rather than shooting a few rolls on a rented 16mm camera. They stick to Super-8, for one thing, because many of the films are used in multi-media performances in clubs and cafes, so there is no particular fetishizing of "image quality", while it does remain important that equipment be portable and easy to handle. Super-8 crosses cities and national borders infinitely more easily than 16. For another, there is a reasonably good distribution network in the form of Kinos in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany which show Super-8 alone, or alongside 16 and 35. It is seldom difficult to find a Super-8 projector in Berlin.

The equipment for production comes from either individual resources or the resources of small groups, usually with a core of about five people. Although more structured Super-8 clubs exist, the groups of people I encountered were formed out of pre-existing friendships, common aesthetic and political interests, and sometimes sheer economic necessity. And these groups could usually manage

to put together a pretty impressive array of equipment. Though some people owned no projectors, almost everyone had a camera. Quite often, the equipment on hand included the best available brands and models.

Most of the filmmakers working in Super-8 in Berlin are satisfied with the post-production results they can obtain with their own cameras, editors, projectors and cassette recorders. If the need arises, a mixer and sound processing equipment can be produced without too much trouble.

For the more formally exacting, concerned with frame-precise control of sound-image relationships through cutting, there is the "perfo-band" system. In this system, ¼" tape with center perforations is synched on a tape recorder with a projector or special editor.

Though there are no Super-8 film processing labs in Berlin, film can be sent to other cities further west and comes back in a few days. Printing services are offered by several individuals. Most of the prints in this show were made by Manfred Jelinsky of Berlin and demonstrate enviable quality.

I was struck by the refreshing willingness to share equipment among group members. At nearly every stage of the process, equipment was shared among friends and even among individuals with more or less conflicting aims.

At the beginning of my investigation, I suspected that the Super-8 question would prove to be moot. In America, after all, there are media centers and if you hustle hard enough you can accomplish most projects in 16 or video. But the fact is, even here, the support structure doesn't cover everyone and has many disadvantages. In Germany, there are no institutional structures outside of film clubs, university film departments, and the National Film and Television Academies. The vast majority of the films in this show would never have been made had it been necessary to overcome institutional inertia, let alone the pricing structure and general hostility of the industry to truly independent work. But the decisive proof of the importance of the issue comes from the films themselves. The 16mm films I have seen which have come out of Berlin during the past few years when these Super-8 films were made, were — with few exceptions — nothing short of wretched. Mostly slick, well-

mannered pseudo-features made apparently to seed money for projects in 35.

This is not to say that all of the Super-8 work I saw in Berlin was of tremendous interest or inherent merit; even allowing for cultural and linguistic mistranslation, most was deadly dull. As bad as the average American video tape, in fact. Whatever

the explanation, Super-8 has been a vital sector in the cultural life of the city of Berlin. I have made a personal selection from among the many films which form a record of that activity. The curious will discover the criteria of the selection somewhere between the films themselves and the views which follow.





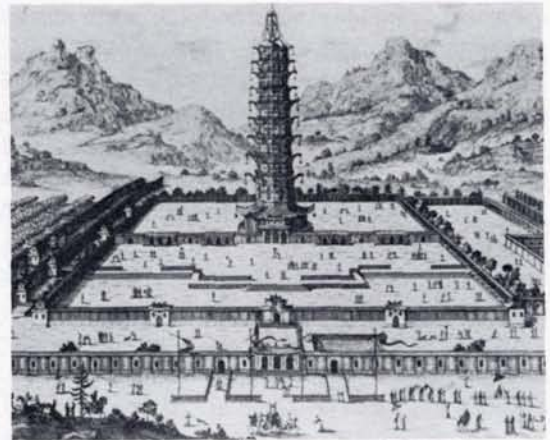
E. Metzner, **Überfall**

### Diagnostic in the form of an imaginary dissection of division

Andre Breton has observed that nothing will kill a man for you like obliging him to represent a country. As a correlative, I have assumed the same holds true for women and for cities, respectively. And for the sake of methodological scruples, I confess that I am writing largely from memory, and so, rely, in part, upon imagination to form the picture of the people, their manners, and civic customs which I shall present hereafter.

The physical artifacts, with which I have returned from my trip to the field, evidence a pathological condition of culture which in many ways mirrors our own. In large measure, however, I will leave to the initiative of the reader, the task of comparison.

What follows is a diagnostic — a description of the filmic symptoms of a half-imaginary city I shall

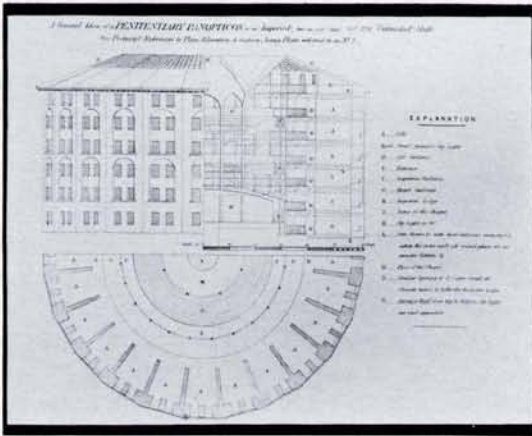


E. Fischer von Erlach, **Nanking Pagoda**

call Berlin, where the characteristic design for living space derives its form equally from the Chinese puzzle box and from the blockhouse.

To formulate that description, it will be necessary for me to perform a work of autopsy upon the living exquisite corpus of work which I have assembled. My description, based on that act of seeing with my own eyes, will take the form of an interrogation, the interrogation of the sensibility of the post-war generation in Berlin. Because I am of the same age, this will be as much an act of self-interrogation as an act of interrogation of the filmmakers with whom I enter into discourse through the medium of their work. This is not meant as a talking cure, but it is certainly a model discourse with an "other".

I will dissect not in order to murder, but I will dissect. My project is to bring to light the curious effects upon the human organism of the architecture of division.



J. Bentham, Plan of the Panopticon

### I'm looking over the wall and they're looking at me

Berlin is a walled city, an inverted fortress — a city walled-in. It lies at the cross roads: spiritually and geographically equidistant from East and West. Geo-political and intellectual center of the world. The inhabitants of New York or Paris or Tokyo or Moscow, or even Buenos Aires are used to flattering themselves with some set of qualifications which places them at the center of the maze of world history; a trip to Berlin destroys any such pretensions. In Berlin, with a twist of a tv dial or a trip across town, you move from West to East and back; with the qualification that you must have started in the West to make the physical trip over and back without risking your life.

Along the wall in West Berlin there are observation platforms not unlike the ones at Niagara Falls, which allow a tourist glimpse into the East. What you see is a zone of concrete, barbed wire, steel defenses, towers full of soldiers with binoculars watching you watch them.

Above the Alexanderplatz in East Berlin stands the tv tower which the East German guidebook refers to as "the new trade-mark of the capital". It can be seen nearly everywhere in both halves of Berlin, like some sinister and banal remnant of an East Block World's Fair. This huge eyeball of the state converts the entire city into a vast yet reciprocal panopticon prison system. You watch; you



The tv tower, "new trademark of the capital"

are watched. At all times. It is a kind of death watch for civilization, as much a wake for the world destroyed by World War II, as a morbid contemplation of the cold, slow agon which could become World War III, at the sight of any given final signal.

**agon** n., pl. **agones**. 1. (in ancient Greece) a contest in which prizes were awarded in a number of events, as athletics, dramatics, music, and poetry. 2. Literature. conflict, esp. between the protagonist and antagonist [*<Gk agōn struggle, contest*]

In Berlin, the double city, everything is halved and doubled — multiplied through division. In the contests with prizes and in deadly conflicts, East and West stand locked in a frozen stare, each the mirror image of the other. Each contemplates the spectacle of the other society; each remains oblivious that it is the society of the spectacle. In the East, ideology is merchandise; in the West, merchandise is ideology. With mirror symmetry, each exploits the ideological merchandise of Nazism to describe the other on tv. And there, in that "other", in the invisible montage of waves which cross in space, the oxymoronic conjoining of Nationalism and Socialism is preserved.

I repeat: Berlin is a city of doubles, divisions, dualities. An infinity of mirrors. Images live a special life and the arts live from the traffic in images. The arts in Germany have risen from the

smoldering ruins of German culture left by the War. Following a prodigious archaeology, the "New German Cinema" began to appear. Recently in America we have seen the level of circulation of German images increase dramatically, not only in the realm of the feature film of the past 20 years, but in the realm of the formal film which grew alongside it as well.

And what of the present generation? We have begun to catch a glimpse of it in the work of the "Neo-Expressionist" painters, *die junge Wilde*, several of whom have made Super-8 films themselves. In the Super-8 films of Berlin, we begin to see the outlines of a new sensibility take shape in film. One that functions apart of the New German Film Industry and largely apart even from the museum and festival structure which emerged to support both the "New" features and the formalist avant-garde.

The work in Super-8 began in the street, in lofts, in studios. It quickly moved not to museums, but to cafes, music clubs, and small independent Kinos (movie theatres). The work in this show is the product — with the possible exceptions of Polish emigree Roza Spak and of Monika Funke Stern — of a generation acculturated through tv

and rock music. The only film historical reference points I could extract from any of the filmmakers I spoke with, was the work of Abel Gance and Fernand Leger. With one or two exceptions, the filmmakers in the show claimed to be entirely ignorant of the formal film of the 60's and 70's, either as it developed in Germany, or abroad. For the saints of the "New German Cinema" I heard only disdain. But Berlin is a city of Kinos, and in a given month you can see anything from Eisenstein to Pasolini and current independent work from Hamburg to Pittsburgh. So it is difficult to sort out with reliability the film influence on this work.

And Berlin is not a city of Kinos alone. There is live music of all kinds, from Gamelan Orchestra to Wagnerian Opera, from David Bowie to Miles Davis. On the radio, you can hear virtually the entire history of music from every sector of every culture in the world. The Super-8 film in Berlin developed in and absorbed much from this musical context as well.

It would seem that the decisive contextual factor in the formation of this sensibility has been the multiplicity in itself of possible sources of cultural influence.



K. Hoffmeister, **Berlin/Alamo**

## Berlin/Alamo

Berlin is a city under siege; the evidence is everywhere. The machine gun pace and the images of machine guns in Knut Hoffmeister's **Berlin/Alamo** ironically reflect this condition. Tanks of American GI's parade up and down, barrels high, while huge black vans disgorge waves of W. Berlin riot police into the streets. These uniformed men are the ghosts of Santa Ana's troops storming the celluloid bastions occupied by John Wayne and Berlin demonstrators. It is a nightmare where the decayed ideology of Hollywood find perverse realization on the street.

The situation is complex. For while West Berlin is surrounded and besieged by East Germany with the "anti-fascist protection wall," the division into two Germanies is imposed from without. East Berlin remains, for all practical purposes, in the hands of the Russians and West Berlin is visibly occupied by French, American and British troops. And then come the internal divisions within the city itself, between the representatives of property, law, and order, on the one hand, and the mass of inhabitants on the other.

The riot police in Hoffmeister's film, for example, are on their way to "monitor" a demonstration



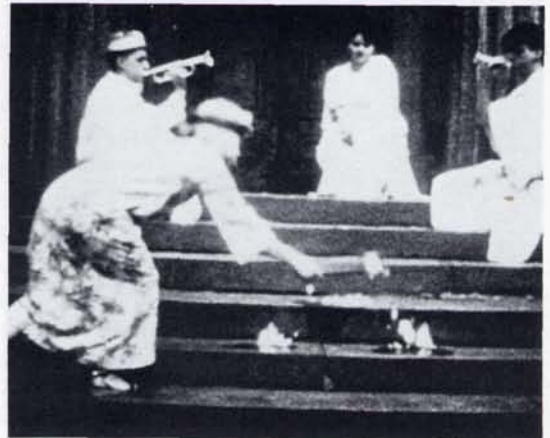
against harassment of "squatters" — people who occupy otherwise abandoned buildings and whose legal status remains in a kind of institutionalized twilight zone.

These vectors of force in complex interaction have shaped the sensibility of this generation of artists who choose to live in Berlin. There is a profound pessimism where so many givens are visibly out of one's control. There looms over Berlin a hyperabundance of authority figures, competing for attention both on tv and in the streets. But the spectacle of so many competing authority figures at a certain point becomes so grotesque, it reduces itself to absurdity. Daily survival demands of these artists and of all Berliners a psychic flexibility seasoned with a global sense of irony. They are survivors on the edge of an abyss which extends back into the entirety of their pasts and forward into the all but unforeseeable future.

The effects of these conditions on the individuals and the work are varied, so that while certain common patterns are visible from time to time, there is no universal code of expressive response to be analytically packaged for intellectual consumption. At every point of contact the ground shifts and threatens to give way, to reduce exegetical architecture to rubble.



R. Wiene, *Caligari*



Teufelsbergproduktion, *Sinn-film II*

### From *Caligari* to *Sinn-film II*

How then should this work be described in aesthetic-political terms? In three words: It is eclectic. This is not to dodge the issue of stylistics by invoking a vague pluralism, but rather to replace it with the issue of cognitive style. For Berliners, all historical styles are equally available, and eclecticism is sometimes pursued as what seems to be an end in itself. It is not. It is a working methodology for making use of the most plentiful civic cultural resource: history. For Berlin is a city surfeited on history. Though young by European standards Berlin has more than compensated for its youth by the excesses of its past 50 years. The work of Teufelsbergproduktion provides a paradigm of these historically eclectic excesses.

They describe themselves this way: "In existence since 1980, Teufelsbergproduktion has up to now made 11 films, from murder mystery to science fiction from romance to industrial film and there is no end in sight."

Their *Sinn-film II* presents a model for their overall project; it is a whack-ball encyclopedia of film and tv styles placed in a comically rigorous frame-tale format. The frame-tale format presents a tale, or series of tales, within the narrative architectural framework of another tale, sometimes with many narrators. Familiar examples are Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and *The Arabian Nights*. This format has a long and

venerable history in German Film, reaching back most significantly to Wiene's 1919 Expressionist masterpiece *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*).

In *Caligari*, the main action is ostensibly framed as a narrative within the deluded conversation of two madmen in an institution. The paranoid delusions of the tale, however, become so wild they burst the frame with a superabundance of bizarre behavior and warped architecture which one is at pains to distinguish from the behavior and architecture of the framing tale. By the end, the audience is in considerable doubt as to which reality — the tale or the frame — deserves privileged credibility. This symptomatic condition is shared by the great, heteroclitic mass of criticism which has attached itself to the film. *Caligari* is the paradigmatic critical fiction for any discussion of German Film. It is all things to all people and so induces a kind of critical aphasia, or to borrow from Jakobson, a contiguity disorder. In this condition metaphor holds dictatorial sway. Syntax, hierarchy, directionality become meaningless, so everything is equally and meaninglessly comparable to everything else. Discourse is reduced to a word heap containing, in the case of criticism, the fragments of favored ideology.

*Sinn-film II* produces a comparable condition, in fact, raising the critical stakes. *Sinn-film II* is indeed the second part of a larger project, with the

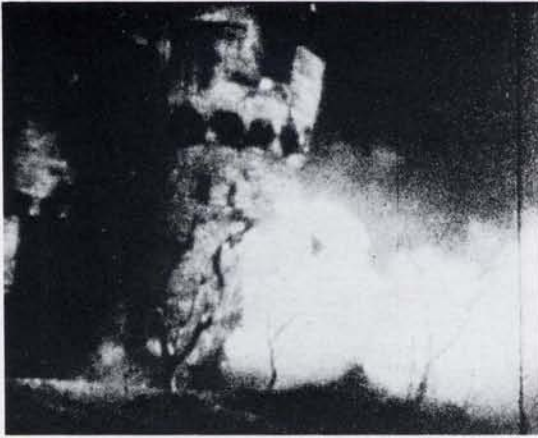
same protagonist and the same stylistic excesses. In **Sinn-film II**, as in **Caligari**, there is a mad doctor and his murderous creation, but there are many symptomatic differences of sensibility: **Sinn-film II** has a **heroine** (cross-dressing as a male in her fantasy), not a hero. And this transgression of sexual roles in the dominant codes of narrative film is extended to cross-dressing by nearly everyone in the film. The result is a powerful alienation effect whereby sex-roles and stereotypes may be viewed at a considerable level of abstraction.

The prismatic multiplication of sex-role identifications has a tradition in Berlin which leads back at least to the notorious sexual border-crossings of the 20's and persists in the mythology of androgyny so greatly amplified in the media by David Bowie during his stay in Berlin in the mid-70's. And beyond the mainstream of overt hetero-, homo-, and bi-sexuality, the dialectic of clothing and sexual differences leads yet another double life in that city. On the one hand is the institutionalized spectacle of transvestism which one can access through either the Berlin Tourist Office or the numerous club listings in the city magazines. In the city magazines, not only do transvestite performances and clubs constitute their own special category of spectacle, but visiting celebrities of the genre receive attention in feature articles. During my visit, I saw a feature on Craig Russel of **Outrageous** fame. On the other hand, there is the life style of transsexuals, "the third sex" as one of the protagonists in Rosa von Prauhem's **Stadt der Verlorenen Seelen (City of the Lost Souls)** refers to him/herself.

To return to the **Caligari** comparison — the com-

parison, which **Sinn-film II** clearly invokes on its own, it also mercilessly travesties. For the heroine, who has been brought back from the dead, escapes the doctor's control, more like Frankenstein's monster than **Caligari's** Cesare. And the costume of the doctor in **Sinn-film II** looks most like a theft from the wardrobe of **Nosferatu**. In addition, while the framing device suggests an exact relationship — the woman reading plays the murderess in fantasy — the wild profusion of styles and activities, and the competing **Caligari** send-up, (which constitutes a frame tale within the frame), defy any attempts at diagramming its narrative architecture. Both the quality of overabundance and the specific stylistic allusions make clear that **Sinn-film** is the conscious and ironic product of a generation acculturated through tv. For it is there, every second of every waking hour, that appears the most accessible and characteristically conspicuous abundance of the commodities and ideology which compete for the attention of every Berliner.

Finally — finally — **Sinn-film**, besides showing a paradigmatic profusion of styles, shows as well a symptomatic fluctuation in quality, lurching from brilliance of conception and execution to incredible dullness and ineptitude. This inconsistency can put a made-for-tv strain on viewers, sometimes bringing about a totally unintentioned alienation effect. But this is the work of a generation — as the original Expressionists called themselves — of "apocalyptic adolescents." It should hardly be surprising that it occasionally produces adolescent apocalypses.



A. Hillen, *Revue Film*



### Turnabout is fair play

A more understated manifestation of the tendency to stylistic eclecticism can be found in Andrea Hillen's *Revue Film* (*Spectacle Film*). *Revue Film* sets up a series of complex interactions of point of view. The Frankenstein myth and the shot/reverse shot system in narrative are brought into dialogue with current racial mythology and the immediate, yet otherly, astylistic quality of home movies. In a series of strategic substitutions, the extreme reactions of the burghers in the Frankenstein film are intercut with handheld footage taken by the filmmaker of Turkish children looking out a window, playing games, blowing soap bubbles. To the accompaniment of sinister music, the burghers are shown to view the Turkish children as monsters threatening the integrity of social architecture. Here lies exposed the institutionalized racism felt and practised in Germany against Turkish guestworkers and their families. *Berlin/Alamo* as well makes reference to this condition, showing Turkish children at play at the construction profession of many of their parents. They rehearse the construction of yet another small wall in the public sandbox.

Hillen's film is prime Super-8 material; it turns the consumer medium on itself. Shortened versions of Hollywood features which are distributed on Super-8 can be confronted with anything the filmmaker chooses from the immediate surroundings. Official Industry Mythology can be made to self-

deconstruct on contact with directly observed realities.

The dialogue of personal and official realities in this format is symptomatic of a major component of the sensibility of the current generation of artists not only in Berlin, but here as well. Now that moving images have become truly accessible on a mass scale, the "aura" described by Benjamin is finally being brought under close critical scrutiny. "Finally" because, contrary to Benjamin's intuition, the mere injection of the technology of mechanical reproduction into the culture proved insufficient to destroy the aura while the control of the means of photographic and cinematic reproduction remained in the hands of capital. Instead, the media industries managed to transfer the aura from the individually fetishized objects of the past (paintings, sculpture) to mythically favored individuals – the stars who inhabit the media paradise of high fashion and eternal vacation. It is the shift to mass **accessibility** of the media which has proved decisive. This shift has brought about a change in sensibility which distinguishes current work in film, especially in Berlin, from apparently similar work in the Underground film of the 60's.

That shift in accessibility has two major components.

The first component is a qualitative leap in media intelligence occasioned by the drastic increase in the time devoted from a very early age to viewing motion pictures on television.

The second component is the shift of the means of **production** of sound motion pictures out of the exclusive control of the media industries and into the hands of the great masses of individuals in the form of sound Super-8.

Though 16mm was available as early as the 1920's, sound production, especially synch sound production (our media standard for authenticity) has remained a financial hardship or impossibility for all but a few. The cost of Super-8 remains relatively low. Distribution is as simple as setting up your projector and getting people into a room.

The relatively low cost of Super-8 technology is at this point infinitely more reliable and cheaper than "low-cost" video, especially as concerns editing and display to groups of more than three people. And again, Super-8 crosses borders more easily than video, which is especially important in Europe. Not only does it have the innocuous appearance of consumerism pleasing to border officials, there is only one Super-8 format. The number of incompatible video standards and formats boggles the mind. In the current state of affairs, it is disheartening to consider that Super-8 seems doomed to rapid extinction in the face of the massive shift apparent in this country toward electronic media. The consumer market, of which Super-8 is a part, constantly reorients itself in favor of the function of consumption. The video disc, for example, is a one-way street towards the elimination of media participation by the great masses of population. The lack of universal acceptance of the disc format and the proliferation of disc formats is some cause for hope. It remains to be seen whether market incentives will remain for the production of consumer video tape technology and at what level of quality, especially as concerns editing.

A ferocious legal battle is now taking place which could, if the Media Industry gets its way, undermine the accessibility of small format video by increasing its costs through taxes to be returned to the Industry as compensation for loss of revenue through home piracy of broadcast programming. These taxes will have the immediate effect of decreasing sales and, in turn, further increasing costs by reducing production scale. This double effect will take the video recorder out of the hands of an undetermined number of people, effectively disenfranchising them from participation in the production of moving images. It is precisely the function

of recording in the hands of the mass-consumer which Hollywood perceives as a threat. And the psychic charge of that threat goes beyond simple consumer piracy; it is the privileged and stable position of control of public consciousness which is at stake.

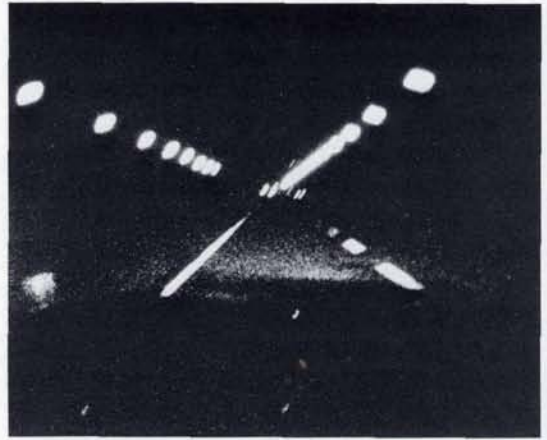
I have digressed on this point at some length to place in perspective the cultural importance of Super-8. For while it clearly stands at the cutting edge of current media activity, its importance can only be gauged by reference to its place in the larger picture of the clash of personal and official realities.

This critical dialogue of personal and official realities made possible by Super-8 is the motive force of Yana Yo's **Gehindieknieunddrehdichnichtum (Benddownanddon'tturnaround)**, subtitled "a black and white film to dance along with." In this case, a repeating loop of a scene from East German tv showing small Chinese children exercising en masse, is set to two rock songs by German bands. First we hear DAF (Deutsche Amerikanische Freundschaft = German American Friendship) tell us to move our asses, to dance the Mussolini, to do the Adolf Hitler, to do the Jesus Christ. Then we hear a short fragment of a more instrument-dominated song by Saal 2 as frame-by-frame handpainting produces a flicker of contrasting colors. Image, music, and color merge in a stroboscopic, epileptic dance of political and perceptive opposites, as the matter goes somewhat nihilistically out of control, or reaches a higher dialectical synthesis, depending on your personal level of flicker tolerance.

The instruction of the title "don't turn around" can be taken as ironic reference to a poster which appeared a few years ago on the observation towers in the East overlooking the "anti-fascist protection wall." The poster facing west instructed: "Turn around. Your enemy is behind you." It showed a huge uniformed and geometrically stylized Nazi about to overpower a small citizen soldier from behind. It advised that the spirit of Nazism was lurking in West German leaders; they wanted men in uniform only to renew old plans for conquest. But the possible truth of the reference to the enemy behind is schizophrenically split by the visible presence of the enemy in front. For Berliners, turn-about is not only fair play, it is a major component of the strategy for daily psychic and physical survival.



C. Doering, 3302



### Space and confinement: we are the passengers

A number of the films in this show can be read as variants of the genre of the city symphony, inaugurated by and for this city with Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin, Die Symphonie der Grosstadt (Berlin, Symphony of a City)* of 1927. It is the model Modernist film treatment of the city; the urban milieu is seen in musical analogy as a formal concert of machine and machine-like human rhythms. Though it is doubtful there is any direct influence of Ruttmann on this group of filmmakers, the comparison is instructive by way of making obvious the differences between the Modernist and Post-modernist treatment of the city.

The sheer exhilaration in the machine rhythms of the modern rail network which brings us into center city in Ruttmann's film has been replaced by a more distanced observation of an endless expanse of highway. A critical consciousness now moves over the paths of the pavement and the videoscreen. *Noisia: Vision, Narcolepsi, 3302, Berlin/Alamo*, and *Incendio Italiano* share a common discourse of genre based on this motif. Each, however, takes us for a different drive along it.

Hormel chooses a roughly symmetrical overall structure for his film which is reproduced in the typographic play of the title. By slight deformation, "Vision" is mirrored in the made-up "Noisia." The approximation to a palindrome in language finds a

correlative in the bracketing of the bulk of material in the film with the image of eye burnt-through. At the beginning, the eye is burnt through to the whiteness of the screen which is then filled with the images of an inner vision. This inner vision is realized in film, but seems intentioned to transcend it. At the end, we see the same burnt-through eye reverting to its normal functional integrity.

Bühler's *Narcolepsi* references the pathological condition characterized by frequent unpredictable lapses into short periods of deep sleep, linking the condition of her imagery by metaphor to the dream state. She takes us not only through the expanses of the Autobahn and the videoscreen, but through outer space and into the inner expanses of desire, moving us forward by symbolic transitions and transpositions.

Doering's vision of Berlin stands in stark contrast to these. He gives his nights in taxi number 3302 a powerful dose of film noir, populating them with a superb gallery of Berliner types. From the edge of the street they jump out at us and into his back seat. And while Doering leaps momentarily into ecstatic and grotesque hallucination, he always returns to ground the charge in the concrete. In *3302*, reality assumes the quality of a tangible and relentless nightmare.

Hoffmeister's *Berlin/Alamo* examines violence and social struggle in the street. His style cuts closer to Doering than to Hormel or Bühler, but his world view is possessed of a unique intensity

generated by a level of overt political commitment unrivalled by other filmmakers of the genre.

Kiesel, in **Incendio Italiano** (roughly, **Italian Conflagration**) takes the metaphor of highway travel as the central axis for an exploration of poetic sensibility in the grand tradition of Goethe's Italian journeys and Thomas Mann's **Death in Venice**. The woman we see "speaking" German at the beginning, "speaks" Italian at the end. This newscaster indexes the passage from one sensibility to its opposite, but only a rough directionality obtains during the course of the film. Our road trip floats freely between north (a jerky loop of the Berlin wall) and south (vacation footage). Daily activities are seen, under the motif of a flickering, warped grid, to hold a mysterious energy which film can release. A shoe is tied, later we see the same footage, projected in reverse to reveal a strange beauty in the gesture. This is a more purely poetic enjoyment of a trope we see in Vertov's **Kinoglaz**, where a living steer is reassembled from a rent carcass. But Vertov moves didactically in one direction against the current of the dominant representation of reality. Kiesel gives preference — though not an exclusive one — to a kind of meditative mirror play, relying on a system of references internal to the film and to German culture.

The track of **Incendio** was created by Frieder Butzmann, a well-known Berlin musician. It flows

in dense parallel movement with the stream of images, re-enforcing the elegantly oblique references of the imagery to the economic and political state of things.

The formal mirror play of **Noisia: Vision** and **Incendio Italiano** recalls the narrative bracketing of the framing tale in **Sinn-film II**. In a situation where all images and historical styles are felt to be equally available at any given moment, the filmmakers take recourse to mirror repetition to delineate the problematic of cognitive boundaries.

The favored exploration of an infinite highway is more than the employment of a formal armature to string together otherwise unconnected incidents in these films. It is a strategic and symptomatic response to the conditions of constriction and compression imposed on the inhabitants of a walled city, the inner walls of which lose themselves in internal divisions. These filmmakers take significant detours from the track of Ruttmann's purely formal observation of movement, giving critical insights into the urban environment, revealing the inner mechanisms of memory and desire. These detours distance the current work from the machine age Modernism and superficial treatment of urban space which allowed Ruttmann to participate in the making of **Triumph of the Will** and ultimately to meet his end shooting newsreels on the Eastern Front.

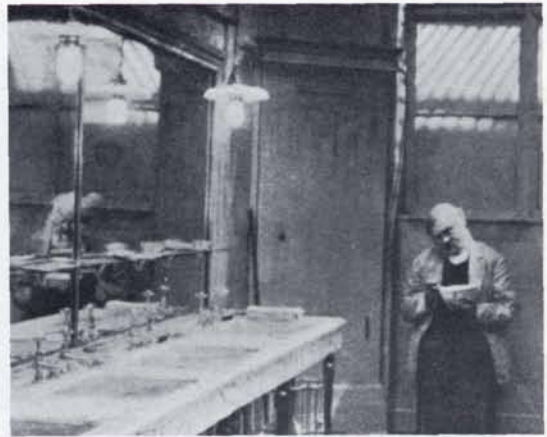


H. Markgraf, *Norma L*

### Fa-Fa-Fa Fashion

Berlin suffers from what might be called terminal clothing sickness. Dress, make-up, fashion are part of the daily lives of people in every city, but in no other city I have seen does clothing hold such absolute power. Clothing in every city constitutes are part of social identity, but in Berlin all clothing attains to the status of a uniform. And Berlin is a city absurdly abundant in uniforms.

In this context, there exists a perverse, yet discernible relation between Murnau's *Last Laugh*, (*Der letzte Mann*) and Markgraf's *Norma L*. Lotte Eisner says of Murnau's film, "This is preeminently a German tragedy, and can only be understood in a country where uniform is king, not to say God. A non-German will have difficulty in comprehending all its tragic implications." I can only confirm the enduring importance accorded to clothing; for example, I watched a woman – a dead ringer for the woman in *Norma L* – in the Cafe Swing in Berlin on a busy night spend 45 minutes putting on her make-up in the middle of the room, using the front window for a mirror. If the ending to *Norma L* seems somewhat banal and forced, i.e. unmotivated, the film in its entirety remains important both as a symptom of current behavior and a conscious response to the conditions of the environment. For the filmmaker's sympathies lie with the woman; for him, the careful attentions to make-up and dress constitute a kind of Post-modern heroism of everyday life. The stylishly ominous, sensual atmosphere anticipates her end; she is preparing an



F.W. Murnau, *Der letzte Mann*

exquisitely made-up corpse.

Similar attention to the quality of everyday life is to be found in *Der Tanz Mechanikk* by R.S. Wolkenstein. But instead of stylish tragedy, we encounter, at least initially, virtuoso comic treatment of the world of techno-constructivist fashion and better living through consumer electronics. The conclusion to this film, however, is affected by a similar and pathological confusion of the tragedy of the banal with the banalization of tragedy. The flat, relentless, precision of the drum-machine track provides witty counterpoint for the initial expository episodes. But it simply cannot rise to the level of a mechanism of fate, when the final images fail to convince us with their harmless attempts at the grotesque. We cannot identify with the reactions of the woman to those photographs. There remains only an impression of unnecessary constraint.

Both *Norma L* and *Tanz Mechanikk* display a symptomatic feeling of the lack of an authentic or enduring ground for everyday life. The fall from structural integrity and psychological authenticity experienced at the end of both films is like a collapsed version of the inconsistency of the Teufelsberg film. I experienced a similar mixture of vague disappointment and uneasiness before the massiveness and geometric ultra-regularity of Berlin architecture, as if I were condemned to temporary confinement to some monumental and labyrinthine shopping mall.



Moreau, the younger, Illustration for an edition of Rousseau's *Emile*



Die tödliche Doris, *Das Leben des Sid Vicious*

### The primitive/the mythic/the child

Dance and painting films are almost always the worst possible failures, with music films coming in a close third. Somehow, with the exceptions that constitute genius, such as Maya Deren, the ontological integrity of either film or the other medium is rudely compromised by some fallacious comparison, or assumed metaphoric identity between the two. While I would stop short of declaring *Was für Geister? (What kind of ghosts?)* a work of genius, the film is certainly extraordinary in the ease with which filmmaker/painter/musician Antje Fels brings us into an experience of ritual in painting, in filmmaking, in music.

The rhetoric of the work is an eclectic expressionism, which draws freely on a variety of 20th century sources. The effect is a sort of tribal meeting of ancestral spirits — Picasso and Pollock, Murnau and Brakhage — African, American, and European Art.

In Berlin, painting is practised both privately and publicly as a performance/ritual. Not only do many painters paint with music at home, as they do here, but recent years have seen painters painting in public performance, both alone and in collaboration with musicians making music, and filmmakers showing and shooting film. Occasionally the roles are even interchanged; a marked contrast to the neo-professionalism and disciplinary territoriality here. Fels created the track for this film in

collaboration with Nickolaus Untermollen, playing along with the projected film.

In a way, this **sounds** sort of hippy-dippy, neo-60's, but Berliners make it work. They break down the division of spectator and spectacular product by incorporating the process of production into the experience of art. This breakdown, however, as it assumes the form of a ritual, exacts its price in separating itself from everyday life. But the need is great, for this need to ritualize production in art is a product of the pessimism which comes with a consciousness of limits — the limits imposed by foreign occupation and internal division — a tangible, visible, overwhelming presence of history in daily life. This is disabused if desperate tribalism.

And the practice of ritualization is not confined to the domain of art. Even a riot in Berlin possesses an aspect of stylized play. One throws rocks, then goes to the park for a picnic; one returns to overturn cars, then heads for a cafe. But this play contains the threat of real violence, for to maintain their charge, the brackets of ritual draw energy from danger, from the uncertain in the midst of the known.

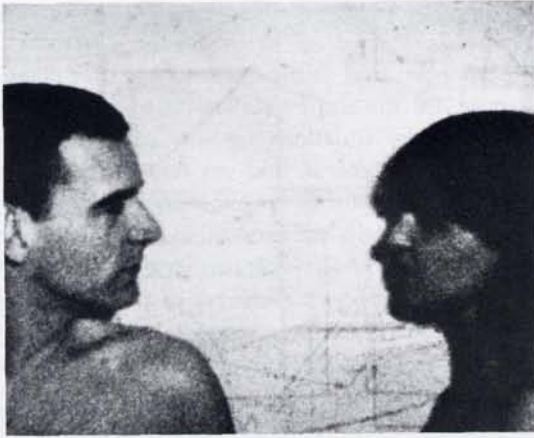
An even further disabused encounter with tribalism is to be found in *Das Leben des Sid Vicious (The Life of Sid Vicious)* by Die tödliche Doris (The deadly Doris). Doris is a mythological, Duchampian porno-queen for the post-war generation, whose female members were so commonly branded in Germany with the name. Doris is also a group

of artists consisting of Wolfgang Muller, Nickolaus Utermollen and usually one other person. Their activities include the promulgation of her official mythology, the publication of books, and live performances. Performances may include on a typical evening stories around a real campfire built on stage, rigorously controlled and highly dissonant music on electric and amplified instruments (only loosely comparable with NYC Noise Music), and last, but not least, films. **Das Leben des Sid Vicious** is among four or so films they have produced.

**Das Leben des Sid Vicious** is, simply, one of the most compelling and creepy films I have ever seen. It exactly expropriates "the child" from the numinous trinity hallowed from the Enlightenment through High Modernism of the primitive/the

mythic/the child. It accomplishes this by treading a path on the boundary between home movies, pornography, and feature film.

It brings to a definitive end the credibility of the Brakhagean project of recovering childhood innocence through heroic individual male formal bravado on the sacred mountain above the lowlands of popular culture, home of the feature film. At the same time, it gives the lie to the genial exploiters of popular culture like McClaren. And — why not at this point in the hyperbole — its treatment of violence exposes the outrageous and evil banality of everyday life lived in the shadow of the media — our most perfect image of the society of the spectacle in which we "live".



A. Brand & A. Maschmann, **Computer Bild**



W. Gramming, **Hammer und Sichel**

### From the body to the body politic

Aware that divisions are partly a matter of convenience, partly of necessity for depicting an imaginary divided city, we move to assemble and dissect a final exquisite corpus of work: the body. We begin at the beginning: the paradisaical, binary setting of **Computer Bild** (**Computer Image**) by Brand-Maschmann. Brand-Maschmann might be described as a highly energetic two-bodied system; one of a number of such systems to be found in Berlin. This system, however, has been found to exhibit a large number of capacities, including that of transmitting large amounts of energy across vast distances. This unique capacity has played a key role in the organization of many exhibitions of Super-8 from Berlin, both there and abroad. The application of this capacity at several critical moments aided greatly in making possible this exhibition as well.

**Computer Bild** highlights another of the productive capacities of the Brand-Maschmann system: multiplication through division. To the accompaniment of edenic electronic birdsong and pingpong, we witness first, a division into complementary colors, then division into color and image. Next, as the pair in the image divides, as each member, in turn, leaves the frame, we witness the division of space within the frame and the division of the space of the frame from the space outside it. Finally, as the image of the pair is projected by one half of the pair (Axel) onto the other (Anette), we are

made conscious of the division of the projected from the real and, by implication, of what we see on the screen from ourselves.

Through this repeated application of different strategies of division, the most basic film viewing situation has been multiplied to produce a potentially infinite field of possibilities.

**Speed** by Funke Stern presents a less edenic account of the effects of bodily division. This film forms part of a project of feminist work in film. Though elsewhere the feminist project is referenced more explicitly, it remains important for understanding the resonances of this more personal work above the level of purely formal concerns. In **Speed** the filmmaker takes us through a dialectical play of active and passive viewing. First, an active outward pursuit of seeing the world from a moving car, then a reflexive, pixillated, handheld hop-skip-jump dance of the filmmaker's own feet as she traverses several terrains Maya Deren style. Next, she assumes the position in front of the camera, moving from a passive role in the presence of the camera stare to a more active, playful, irreverent engagement. Then comes an archetypal passive female media role model in the form of a richly adorned Marlene Dietrich in a highly compressed fragment of some romantic entanglement. Because of the mechanical differences between film and video, the image on tv which we normally take for granted is distorted in the process of its appropriation by the filmmaker. This distortion and the time lapse compression (used as well in the previous section of

the film) creates a distance between ourselves and the material. It becomes "other". We see below its surface effects as it is brought into the dialectic of seeing and being seen. We intuit the effect of the original material on how women are seen by others and how they come to see themselves as "other". In short, the mechanism of the division of women from themselves and their transformation into the property of others.

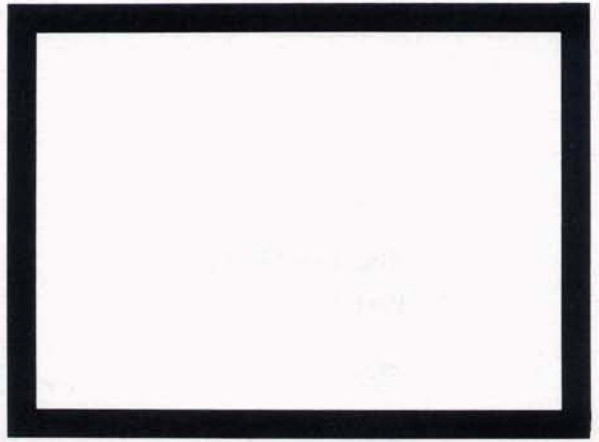
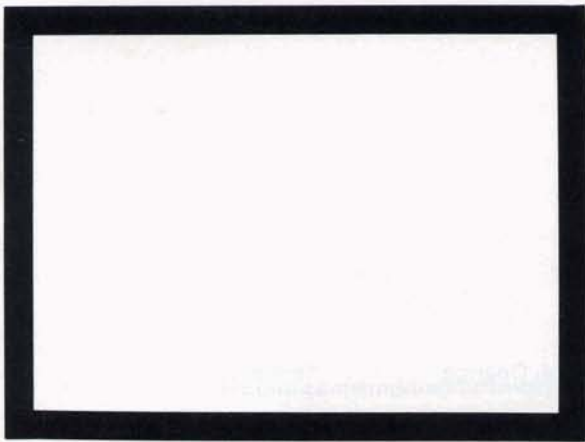
Finally we return with the filmmaker to watching herself, this time as she rides a bicycle. Having passed back and forth across the cultural dividing line of the frame, of the division between seeing and being seen, we have been made conscious of its divisive effect upon the body and the self.

A more gruelling interrogation of bodily identification and division is to be found in Roza Spak's **Handlich**. The title introduces us to a situation of ambiguity, where what is manageable may slip into what may be touched with the hands. From the language of the title, we move to its bodily seat, the mouth. The mouth is touched with the hands. The hands move to touch fish on a table. The hands move to bring a knife to the table. The fish on the table are brought to the knife.

We are connected by successive, contiguous movements to the fish on the table to be cut, creating a gruesome, tactile identification between what is cut and the one who cuts. As viewers, we are drawn into active, attentive participation in an act, the repulsiveness of which we usually strive to ignore. The vertigo of the ambiguous relation between ourselves and what we see is further intensified by the contrast of the lush symphonic track with the spectacle of disembowling.

Watching, I am reminded of the violence lurking just below the surface of civilization. Listening, I am reminded that in the death camps they played Wagner. By the end I have identified myself with this particular situation in a way which becomes symbolic and general, and yet remains bound to this particular film as an experience anchored in its concrete details and retained as a personal memory. The gauze which heals neither the fish nor the filmmaker is an ironic reminder of the rent in the body of our experience made by the film. The question remains open whether we have been healed by this intense experience of bodily division.

Walter Gramming's **Hammer und Sichel (Hammer and Sickle)** assaults the categorical divisions of the modern state with a grotesquely comic attack on the symbolic distinction between the body and the body politic. The fetish quality of the symbol of the East German State – surround W. Berlin and engaged in holding up the struggle of the working class in the paranoid Stalinist tradition – is exposed. All that is sacred to the Bureaucracy and the Army of the German Democratic Republic is held up to ridicule. Gramming takes a wild romp, garbling patriotic songs, parodying stereotypical poses, attacking the integrity of the filmstrip, and even menacing the chastity of these material representatives of the symbol. The film's final image reminds us, however, that this iconoclastic play is propelled by the consciousness of the capacity for real violence latent in that symbol and in those who use it as a privileged means of representation. It is the image of a hierarchy of outrageous violence; to bring it down requires a commensurate violence of outrage.



### **A report of two sightseeing incidents in place of a conclusion**

Some Berliners who became friends in the course of my visit told me the story of some Italian friends who had come to visit them a few months earlier. After a few days of acquainting themselves with the city, the guests inquired where they could buy a plastic model of the Berlin Wall, such as one might find of the Colosseum in Rome.

In West Berlin, a few blocks from the Stock Exchange, near a theater playing Brecht's **Rise and Fall of Arturo Ui**, I noticed a monument. It consisted of two 3 x 6 foot slabs of grey granite placed about 100 feet apart. Each had a text in German. One read "To the Victims of National Socialism" and below was a pair of dates to delimit the period ending in 1945. The other read simply: "To the Victims of Socialism". No limiting dates. Somewhere in East Berlin, there must exist at least one other pair of granite slabs.

## **The Exhibition**

### **Part I**

<b>3302</b>	Christoph Doering	18.6 min.
<b>Computer Bild (Computer Image)</b>	Axel Brand & Anette Maschmann	3.6 min.
<b>Was für Geister? (What kind of ghosts?)</b>	Antje Fels	10.8 min.
<b>Der Tanz Mechanik (The Dance Mechanick)</b>	R.S. Wolkenstein	7.0 min.
<b>Noisia: Vision</b>	Dieter Hormel	11.9 min.
<b>Speed</b>	Monika Funke Stern	9.0 min.
<b>Das Leben des Sid Vicious (The Life of Sid Vicious)</b>	Die tödliche Doris	10.0 min.
<b>Incendio Italiano</b>	Thomas Kiesel	21.9 min.

## **The Exhibition**

### **Part II**

<b>Gehindieknieunddrehdichnichtum (Benddownanddon'tturnaround)</b>	Yana Yo	2.9 min.
<b>Norma L</b>	Horst Markgraf	6.2 min.
<b>Berlin/Alamo</b>	Knut Hoffmeister	9.7 min.
<b>Revue Film (Spectacle Film)</b>	Andrea Hillen	3.0 min.
<b>Handlich (Handleable)</b>	Roza Spak	9.6 min.
<b>Hammer und Sichel (Hammer and Sickle)</b>	Walter Gramming	6.4 min.
<b>Narcolepsi</b>	Brigitte Buhler	7.0 min.
<b>Sinn-film II (Sense-film II)</b>	Teufelsbergproduktion	45.0 min.

HALLOWAYS