

I
G E R M A N Y

YOU DESTROY EVERYTHING



Schmelz Dahin

an interview with **CHRISTIANE HEUWINKEL** *and* **JÜRGEN REBLE**

JÜRGEN REBLE is a member of **SCHMELZ DAHIN** along with Jochen Müller and Jochen Lempert (see previous interview). Their three-headed collaborations have produced a remarkable body of work over the past fifteen years, including 37 films along with performances, installations and actions. Most of their work has been produced on super-8. With the completion of *City in Flames* in 1984 their work took a new turn, looking to the film material itself to engineer a darkly delirious chemistry that works to re-connect science and nature, human and animal.

CHRISTIANE HEUWINKEL is a founding member of the **ALTE KINDER** distribution collective. Unlike the members of *Schmelz dahin*, who work together to produce films under a common name, *Alte Kinder's* four members work together to present their own work. Born in 1961, she began art history studies 20 years later in the University of Bielefeld, a small city where all the members of *Alte Kinder* reside. There she met up with Matthias Müller, who encouraged her to participate in the University's film workshop. She did, and along with Müller and six others came together in 1985 to form *Alte Kinder*. Almost all of their production has been in super-8. It is important to note that no centralized distribution service exists for German experimental film; there are no organizations like the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, Canyon or New York Filmmakers. *Alte Kinder's* tireless activities, which have taken their super-8 work around the world, is an important self-initiative which has helped introduce audiences to experimental film. Christiane Heuwinkel began her filmwork in 1983, working with Matthias Müller. These close friends have produced five films together. Two other films, *3-minute anyone-can-do-it send ups of Gone With the Wind* and *Rear Window*, have been made in collaboration with another member of the group, Maija-Lene Rettig. Her most recent film, *Welcome You*, was made for Owen O'Toole's *Filmmaker's Almanac*. Heuwinkel works exclusively in super-8 and is largely self-financed.

O V E R T H E W A L L

MH:
Maybe you could both introduce yourselves.

CH:
My name is Christiane Heuwinkel. I'm a filmmaker and work in a distribution co-op called Alte Kinder, begun four years ago. I've worked for nine years in film and only in super-8. After a while I got to know some other filmmakers who worked and lived in the same city, Bielefeld, and we thought as there is no distribution

making films.'

MH:
Why the name Schmelz dahin?

JR:
After one of our first screenings some people said 'schmelz dahin' - that was the only reaction. We work a lot with the material, treating it in different ways. For instance, we put so much light on the film that it burns down while it is projected, and this is also a schmelz dahin, a melt away of the material. So this was a

protest/process of five or six years in which we published a lot of short films.

MH:
Jochen said you've been working together for twelve years.

JR:
Yes, with Jochen, but there's a third person whose been with us only since 1983 when we became more serious. Before 1983

were just the first experiments. I wouldn't publish these today, they're not important to the development of our later work.

MH:
What kind of films were they?

JR:
Joke films. Funny animated films without serious ideas, serious plans.

MH:
Did that change when the third person came in?

JR:
Not directly. In 1983-4 we began to work more intensively on some things, for example, the material. In 1984 one film I think was important was *Stadt im Flammen* or *City in Flames*. This is a very strange, compact film because there's only one scene, the treatment of the material, and the form is very strong. This is for me the first film, we made it for publication. *City in Flames* was a very cheap B-movie, a super-8 copy of a terrible film which contained only action scenes and catastrophes. I buried it in a wet place in the garden and forgot it for about 1/2 year and bacteria spread its different layers. The whole film was disturbed by the bacteria and there emerged something completely different.

Then I threaded it into a sewing machine to make holes into the film, then I copied it on an optical printer. I took four frames from each single frame of the original, and heated it so much that it began to melt. The lens was so hot, as it stood, it melted away (laughs) There is no original left, it's lost to its copy. Then Jochen came and we made the sound together. He had this idea of hitting his chest while droning and it was a good combination. *Stadt im Flammen* was like a structural film, one idea which demonstrates a process. Later we were more interested in montage, to combine themes of different material and open the film in a more analytic way to build up some interesting...

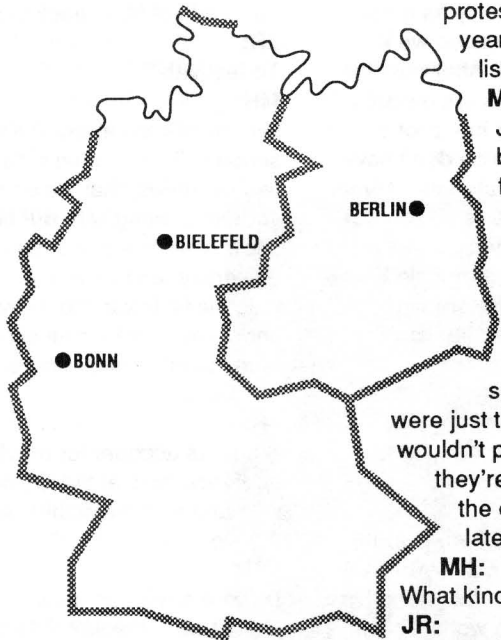
CH:
Levels of association in the film.

MH:
There was a shift then in the way you made films, from the costume drama joke films to a three-sided collaboration focussed on the materials. Why this shift?

JR:
We had not much discussion about this, because if someone did something it was accepted by the other two. Most of the films were not made with three but just two, or one made the image and one the sound. In the search to find something new in the material it was difficult for us to have an idea or treatment and only to work on that idea. It was also important to make new experiences, possibilities, change. With normal processes, if you give the film to the lab you always get the same result. If you work on the material you have a lot of possibilities to bring it to a new form. It's not so important to arrange the world around me. For me it's more interesting to take it as it is and make the rest through development.

MH:
The films seem to have both the life of its original, the calling of its origin, but also the scars of this disfigurement, of its re-making. It's very rare that groups evolve in experimental film - Schmelz dahin makes work together, and Alte Kinder distributes together.

CH:
Yes, we have a completely different way of making films. For us it was clear that everyone wanted to make his/her own films but distribute them together. Even if



system for super-8 films in Germany, we should start one. At first we distributed only our own films, eight members' work, and now we are four. After a while we took on other films we knew and liked, for instance films by Schmelz dahin, and the new idea is to get more films by others.

JR:
My name is Jürgen Reble. I live in Bonn. I've worked since 1983 together with two other people under the name Schmelz dahin which means melt away. We tried to work in a group together to change our materials and our ideas, and published films not with our names but only with the name of the group.

MH:
Why?

JR:
I think it was a kind of protection because we had no experience with public presentations. Then it was not so hard when someone says, 'Forget it. It's shit. Stop

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we help each other in our making, the authorship is clear. I've worked sometimes with a friend of mine, Matthias Müller. We made our first film together when we studied in Bielefeld. Matthias studied art and film, but not only film. I studied German language and history. Apart from this we worked in film together. Then at festivals we got to know some other people who also made films in Bielefeld, and we said, 'Why do

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we go separately to these festivals? Why don't we go together as we're all filmmakers from Bielefeld?' So we began the distribution, showing our films in several places.

MH:

Is it difficult to show super-8?

CH:

Some of the Kommunale Kinos show it, but often we have to bring our own

projector. It's beginning a little bit with art galleries. When we started in 1984 there was a terrible prejudice against super-8, they claimed super-8 was for dilettantes, and we said, "we are dilettantes and we are good and we will show you." At the beginning it was not so easy to show our films, but after awhile people knew us, we got a kind of name. They could read about our films and then we got some small prizes, this was something to show them that we work with super-8 not only as amateurs but because we love this material. After our film shows we always discuss how super-8 has a lot of possibilities you don't have with other materials - 16mm or video. We've shown our work in festivals, small art galleries, Kommunale Kinos, youth centres, drop in centres, film clubs, cafes, bars....

JR:

I think you can find 40 places in Germany to tour. We did it last year.

CH:

This is a problem. If you want to make film you can't distribute it at the same time; it's too much work. So we set up some dates, say two in a month, then next month nothing, then four shows. It's too difficult to organize a real tour going from town to town for a month. But for instance when another member, Majja-Lene Rettig, went to London she organized four dates there. A year later she was invited back by the Goethe Institute in England. Then the leader of the G.I. in London told the G.I. in Israel

that I wanted to show films there and that was okay so I went to Israel. Matthias has shown films in the U.S.A. and received new invitations as a result and next year he will try to go again. It's a kind of network you develop.

MH:

But always dependent on someone going out with the films?

CH:

This is the central problem. From the beginning we always showed our films accompanied by one or two of the filmmakers. One introduces the film, the other projects. Afterwards we discuss the films. This is the central point, that you have a person who can speak about the films so they're not anonymous.

MH:

I work for a distribution company and it's completely different. We send out hundreds of films each year.

JR:

To festivals?

MH:

No, there's too many. They go mostly to schools. This is a big difference in our two countries, that we could never send someone along with our films, but you show work in a public way, outside the university, and as a result your work is much less academic. Why don't you show your work in the schools as well? Many people teach courses in experimental film.

JR:

Students account for maybe half the audience here at the Osnabrück Festivals and at many festivals, so they see the work.

MH:

Is there a relation between your work and mainstream media? Schmelz dahin uses a lot of ready-made images.

JR:

From other movies. There's already too many images produced. In Germany there's 3 million photographs taken in one year. I think it's possible to take what already exists and make something new.

CH:

And try to make it productive for our work. A friend of ours, a former member of Alte Kinder, worked only with news shows, and put the material in new contexts and made his own political stories out of them. Or you can have your own material and use it like TV images, photographing it in super-8, refilming it in video, then rephotographing it in super-8, a working through of generations which bears the trace of each of its stages. The image itself reveals a history.

MH:

I think that TV makes experimental film impossible because one learns to look in a certain way. If people watched only

O V E R T H E W A L L

experimental film your work would seem quite normal.

CH:
The TV style creates a problem for other styles.

MH:
Some would argue that the experimental film is a small scene, with its own codes, its own ways of making. Some have said the Osnabrück festival isn't exciting because so much of this new work looks old.

JR:
I think there's some things that are important only for yourself. For the people who organize the festivals they need to choose only the really new films.

MH:
How does the group of Schmelz dahin decide whether a film's finished or not?

JR:
Sometimes we decide one or two years later; it's a difficult question. A lot of people should realize what they publish and what they don't. For instance Brakhage has produced a lot of films, but not every film is important to show to the public. It would be better to have a little bit of self-control.

MH:
But how would he know what's public or private?

CH:
I think this is something you decide for each case. When you see the work of Schmelz dahin as a whole you see some works are more important than others. German films are quite different from one another; when you see many experimental films you can say, "I think this film comes from Berlin."

MH:
How can you tell a film is from Berlin?

CH:
Some years ago in every Berlin film it was fashionable to show the wall and policemen on both sides, the Reichstag and the Olympia Stadium, the fascist architecture. Then there were black and white films that were very flat, grey. This was another kind of fashion. There are some special themes or ways of doing it within each film group or school. For instance in the art school in Bremen where Klaus Telscher teaches they

develop their own material, so they have a special outlook. You can say, "I think this film is made in Bremen." But this isn't so important because there's so many places to work.

MH:
Is there an Alte Kinder look?

JR:
(to CH) In the *Flamethrowers* film you're working as a group, but everyone has their own style. I think the most important point is the name, it's your common point.

MH:
Can you describe the *Flamethrower* project?

CH:
Owen O'Toole sent us three super-8 film

thing we show at the moment, but we'll try to blow it up to 35mm.

JR:
We tried to make a third part, taking some of the images that Owen O'Toole and Alte Kinder used and joining them with our own. One condition was to make black and white films, as all the other films were black and white, which was the first time for us, so we tried to find a new method to put the color onto black and white. We found a possibility and made the third part in red and black and white. On the optical printer we shot some stills and repeats of other parts and then introduced our own material.

CH:
What was special about the material



**CONTINENTAL
BREAKFAST**
by
Matthias Müller
with
Christiane Heuwinkel

reels which were made from the first independent film in India. He wrote us, "Do what you want with this material, use it as footage for your own work." We imagined showing them altogether, on three screens. Then we took our own associations and responded. Everyone had a different idea. Two or three days later we realized our films together. We made a second series of three reels. Then we thought that Schmelz dahin might be interested to make the third generation, so we sent them the material. We showed it in Bielefeld as a triple projection, first the three reels by Owen, then Alte Kinder, then Schmelz dahin, but it was very complicated to find three projectors, so we made a kind of trailer which combines the triple projections and pictures from each one. This is some-

Owen sent was that it was almost destroyed. You see traditional Indian scenes, but because the material was heated during projection...

JR:
He saw the film in a regular cinema - and the projectionist must have been sleeping; I don't know - and the film was burning away. He asked if he could have it because it couldn't be used any more. Then he made three reels of this material.

CH:
When we saw these great holes within the frame we made an association with pearls, so we filmed a woman lying on the ground with pearls running down her face and body. Sometimes you see the same image in each projector, sometimes with a delay in time, some-

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times no picture left and right, only in the middle. Each projector is an instrument. Three chapters. As we watch it we watch the journey of the film through time.

MH:

Can you describe the films you made after *Stadt im Flammen*?

JR:

We work very closely with our material. We have an archive from which we derive our ideas, our process of working.

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of found footage. You're consistent in working on the chemical level of film and working with very heterogeneous material which is combined in new ways.

MH:

Your films are very aggressive.

CH:

Yes Jürgen, because you always destroy, you destroy the film material, you cut open the rat, and in the last film you destroyed your mother.

CH:

(laughs) Sorry.

JR: Sometimes there are no images on the film any more but after one or two years the algae is settled into the emulsion of the film.

MH:

What kind of footage was it?

JR:

Old footage which wasn't important. At the same time we made a narrative section, a figure who demonstrates what's going on with the material, then you see that it happens, and he looks to the film and the film starts. It's a demonstration of what happens to the material. In some parts of the film you can see the rest of the images, of what remains after. Between 1983-87 we did a lot of biological treatment, but now we work more with chemicals.

MH:

Do you process all your own footage?

JR:

Yes, and we make our own prints. This is the possibility to make real independent films, which is why I'm still working on super-8.

MH:

But you've received grants?

JR:

Yes, but we're always working on super-8.

MH:

What does one of your films cost?

JR:

\$70. And another \$70 for the print. To blow it up is more but I don't know if this is necessary because in Germany there's a lot of possibilities to show super-8. I think in North America it's different.

CH:

For me I'll go on in super-8. With our last film, which is called *Epilog*, we tried many different things while working. We thought maybe it was possible to re-film the film in another way, so we tried it. Three minutes only costs us \$10, so it doesn't matter if it comes out with nothing on it. 16mm is too expensive to play with. Our cameras are very small, you can carry them everywhere with you and be spontaneous.

MH:

Do you take the camera with you all the time?

CH:

Not at the moment, but I did when I was

When we started in 1984 there was a terrible prejudice against super-8, they claimed super-8 was for dilettantes, and we said, "we are dilettantes and we are good and we will show you."

We have our own inclinations, our relation to science and nature, and on the other hand we listen, we learn from the film. Many things exist by chance, but it's a selected chance. If you make a film in your head first, you could never imagine these films.

MH:

Is there a look to the Schmelz dahin films, a continuity to your public expression? Are there answers before questions? I think working on the film's surface is a theme, as well as a concern for the name of the group - melt away - a name which expresses itself on a very material level not just in *Stadt im Flammen* but in a number of other films, like the *Flamethrowers*. It's as if this name, taken by chance, held in it a kind of future which could serve both as a mark of your public expression as well as an antidote to the films you find around you, that every join implies both the heat of union, as well as the dissolve of its surroundings.

CH:

At the beginning when we saw the *Flamethrowers* we thought, "Ah, this must be made by Schmelz dahin". You always use animals as commentators to things which happen on the screen. On the sound track you often use short bits

MH:

In *Rumpelstilzchen*?

CH:

You see a woman pushing a tractor, it was his mother.

JR:

And the last part was my son.

CH:

In another film you showed your father.

JR:

My father made some home movies, this is part of the archive now. (laughs) I took this material. It's not just a destruction but building also on this destruction, like Germany.

MH:

There seems a kind of conflict between you and your archive, that it needs to be forced, melted, burned, scarred, to show what's there, undergo these trials...

JR:

I live very close to the material, my trees are full of films. I hang them and leave them there for two or three years.

CH:

Schmelz dahin made a film which is called *Out of the Algae*, where they stored their film in a kind of fish tank for several months...

JR:

Years.

in Israel. I couldn't shoot anything at first because the situation in Israel at that moment was so strange. After two months I began to shoot a little, using the camera as a diary. When I got back I had many film reels, but the film I finally made for Owen O'Toole's Filmmakers Almanac is just four minutes.

MH:
The shooting in super-8 seems very immediate but the editing is no different than any other guage.

CH:
It changes from film to film. In Israel I wanted to make a film of my impressions of this strange country. And as my emotions changed during my stay I had the problem of finding an adequate soundtrack - a commentary on my inner conflict. Other films are very planned; for one I made special drawings, a storyboard.

MH:
Jürgen, can you talk about how you use the camera? After you've been picking through your archive do you decide as a group to go out and shoot?

JR:
It's similar to what Christiane was saying, it's a form of diary, of watching your environment. Often I shoot images and don't know why, it's just material. It's not often that I search for material in a specific way.

MH:
Do you catalogue your archive?

JR:
Most of the images are in my head.

MH:
How big is the archive?

JR:
It changes. To start a film I need about ten hours of material. At times I'm just collecting, I don't know why. Then if I have enough I start to treat the material and make different copies and different processes. The new film I'm working on is more selective material and also longer, but that's another story.

MH:
Will that be a Schmelz dahin film?

JR:
We're not working together.

CH:
It's a kind of divorce.

JR:
If I'm working with other people it's very important to live close to them and to have contact, and experiences. Paul is living 300 km away so I can't meet him, and the other has been traveling for the last half a year, so there's no chance to continue.

POSTSCRIPT: EXCERPTS OF A LETTER FROM CHRISTIANE HEUWINKEL

22.1.90
DEAR MIKE,

Thank you very much for your letter and the interview....When Matthias got the letter, I [was] in Munich, and when i came home i had lots of work which could not be postponed (just jobs to earn some money, nothing serious), so i put

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off what is really important, and gave preference to filthy lucre. Foolish!.... I think it is not mere accident that in both interviews my remarks often refer to co-productions (with Matthias) or the work of the other interlocutor. In contrast to

Matthias or Schmelz dahin, for instance, I am no full-time film artist, more or less an amateur. And in the last two years, when to them filming became more serious and also a way for them to earn their living, my interests changed from practice to theory. Maybe because i am not so creative. I started working at the university after finishing my first exam, and now begin work on a dissertation about early film criticism in German newspapers. It's not that I gave up filming, but at the moment there is other work to be done! A strange situation when Maija, Thomas and Matthias had the premiere of their new films, and I stood there, with nothing in my hands! So sometimes my feelings change - from feeling myself as a part of Alte Kinder and then of drifting away. Maybe this has to do with our problems of finding time for an interview. Sometimes I have the tendency to draw back - and later I regret.

In three weeks I will go to India and show Alte Kinder films in Bombay and Poona. It is very exciting, as the Goethe Institute first invited me and then never responded to my letters. Then, when nothing was clear, Jorg and I decided to buy tickets, call for the visa.... Sometimes I like this feeling of having to improvise, of trying to make the best out of a situation. And I have never been so far east...

Hope I will hear from you soon. Yours,
Christiane!

**CHRISTIANE HEUWINKEL
FILMOGRAPHY**

- Nature Morte** 26 min 1983 (with Matthias Müller)
- Rapunzl** 15 min 1983 (with Matthias Müller)
- Wanderer im Nebelmeer** 17 min 1983/4 (with Matthias Müller)
- Rear Window** 3 min 1984 (with Maija-Lene Rettig)
- Gone With the Wind** 3 min 1985 (with Maija-Lene Rettig)
- Danke** 2 min 1985 (with Matthias Müller)
- Die Schone Landschaft** 7 min 1985
- Epilog** 16 min 1986/7 (with Matthias Müller)
- Welcome You** 4 min 1988/89 (for the Filmers' Almanac)