



Passenger Books in Conversation with Wilhelm Hein

Passenger Books: How did the film project 'You Killed the Underground Film or the Real Meaning of Kunst bleibt ... bleibt ...'—which strangely never seems to want to end—originally come about?

Wilhelm Hein: First of all I made the Holocaust film about the annihilation of the Jews entitled *To Those Who Found No Graves* between 1989 and 1994; it was filmed in Poland with images of the concentration camps, the Jewish cemeteries, from the things that were left. During this whole period—when you have been involved with something for such a long time—it kind of gets stuck in your head and you get the feeling at times that your head might explode. That's why I always did other things in-between as a kind of recreation, so to speak: portraits, short films and such like. And all of these things flowed into this project over the years.

So actually they were by-products?

No, they weren't by-products, it was a question of finding a way out of this unbelievable tension. I didn't visit Auschwitz until relatively late on, the first time was in 1991 or 1992. And when you have suppressed something like that for so long, it kind of knocks you for six. The longer you suppress it, the more difficult it becomes when you're confronted by it. Then it becomes an act of liberation. The filming took four, five years to complete. At some point it came to an end, not the themes, but I had managed to reorient myself more or less. That's the decisive factor, it's an autobiographical thing: how do you escape the straightjacket and finally find yourself in order to be able to work truly independently? One is not just dependent upon economic things, but also everything else that is dumped on your shoulders. I saw Ulrike Ottinger's film at the Berlinale yesterday: there was a quote from Elfriede Jelinek, she's reading the text. As a child she always wanted to go to the Prater and finally free herself from the constraints imposed by her mother, indeed the rest of her family, but she never managed it, her mother fetched her back time and time again. In essence it's my goal—well, not mine explic-

itly, but everyone's goal—to be as absolutely free with the things one wants to do.

And yet to achieve such freedom you ought not to be dependent upon anything, not even upon an artistic medium.

Yes, that's right. You see, filmmaking is my life, a part of my life. It provides a possibility for dealing with life. You have to seize hold of life, get a grip on it. You're living in this world; you can't just say I am an animal or a bird, that's not possible. I used to be involved in other things, all sorts of stuff. I used to paint, draw and write, etc. and filmmaking gradually started to happen ... because film was then as yet more or less an uncharted medium, where one was still relatively unencumbered. I studied art history, an incredible weight on your shoulders, and I also noticed that wasn't really my thing. And then bit by bit it materialized, through reading, too ... It wasn't so much through the practical aspect of the activity itself, but through the discovery of a different film culture, of American underground filmmakers. I didn't start until I was 26, 27; I was a bit of a late-developer in this regard. But the more I thought about it ... You need a long time to find your true self as an artist, if you take something seriously. Everyone is an artist at bottom. You know your predecessors, whether it is a painter, you know what you're interested in, Cézanne knew his predecessors, Picasso knew Cézanne and in this way a foundation is created from which to proceed. That's the first straight-jacket and you have to escape from it somehow. The other way, this totally naive creating, is just kid's stuff, it doesn't work, it's basically amateur art, or if it really works then it is pathology. But it doesn't have anything to do with art in a direct sense, there's no intellectual movement, although what they do is still interesting. Art has a fundamentally conscious element of design. I don't regard myself as a movie director. I don't regard film as an artistic medium. Filming is a special form of expression for itself—like writing poetry—totally independent, absolute independence in fact. When two people collaborate it ultimately ends up being a complete disaster, because each one crowds the other out. One crowds the other and doesn't even notice that it is happening and suddenly you have lost that element of self. And then you have to find a way out of this new straightjacket. And—that is the decisive thing for me, and I am talking about artistic design not about life that is something else—you can only be absolutely uncompromising

with yourself, you can take this risk, and you have to take the risk. Freedom can only reside in work, that's where you can be most happy.

And it can reside everywhere, in every medium?

Yes it can reside everywhere.

So it is a complete coincidence that you are a filmmaker.

Pure coincidence.

You could be a painter tomorrow?

I don't have the talent, I am not good enough. I have come to realize that film is my medium. I also do other things alongside it, such as this book or other things. I would like to draw. I am envious of people who can draw really well, people like George Grosz. Even though I am a music enthusiast, I have tried to play an instrument and I am useless, no talent for it. Where film is concerned I have gradually conquered the medium bit by bit—in a process lasting several years—where I can say I am sure, where I can say I am absolutely positive, that I categorically know what is and what isn't OK, et cetera. We [Birgit Hein and I] made the *Kali Filme* at that time [1987/88] on the subject of death, about all of these stories, horror film classics, we approached this topic bit by bit. Birgit was really scared of these images at first. And then for the first time found footage cropped up in these *Kali* films—which really drew me in—there were the dead of war, the corpses, the dismembered people. I went through the whole documentary material, Russian film material, German film material, American film material and there were three minutes left from a total of over twenty hours with images of dead people. And then I noticed that something wasn't quite right here inside. What's happening here? And that's where the project idea came from [*To Those Who Found No Graves*], bit by bit. I went to the cemeteries I took the film camera and Annette Frick took her 6x6 camera, each to his or her own, and recorded images of Jewish cemeteries. Then we jumped into the deep end and went to Auschwitz. That was in itself an act of liberation, as pathos-filled as it might sound, then suddenly we were in it. That's how it came about, from other things, from out of this muted feeling. You bustle away and then all of sudden the images start to come. And then the work really kicks in, hours of cutting, not cutting ...



These were all your own images, though, not found footage?

They were all my own images, these Holocaust films, concentration camps, cemeteries, synagogues: all original shots, that was the decisive factor. The documents can only be found in the sound, for example this Yiddish music, these wonderful songs that I can't understand a word of, but ones that ultimately make the statement: it was once a whole culture that has since disappeared.

Are there elements in 'You Killed ...'?

There are not so many elements, only allusions, for example at the very beginning, there's this cinema in Poland, a former synagogue.

That's in the book, too.

Yes. And what has increasingly interested me: it has its own emotional level. It was pathogenic, Annette always laughed about it (quite justifiably), but there couldn't be any people on the image, I didn't want any. It was all about having clean images. As soon as children appear on the photos, then it takes on a different dimension, a level of interpretation—the way that Claude Lanzmann [French documentary filmmaker] does it, for which I totally reproach him. Then it is all connected up and then people start saying that it's these people, these Poles, the collaborators, they were responsible for ... All of these fantasies are introduced. But when they are not there, then these fantasies don't exist, then it's just the cemetery, there is sorrow but otherwise nothing, emptiness. Later on this paranoia went away bit by bit and people could start to walk round there again.

You are not concerned with what you can see ...

It's not only a case of "being concerned about" something, it is also the feeling. I was really reluctant. I work in an emotional way, obviously in a rational way, too; reason is a given, but then it goes deeper, otherwise you wouldn't capture the images and then it doesn't come across properly for the viewer.

But does this always work, can it always be understood, particularly in your films?

My work cannot be understood, absolutely not, apart from a small part that is, but that's enough. Otherwise there'd be nothing left even in 50 years.

New thoughts are constantly being added, everyone fills it with their own thoughts.

What's with all the porn?

There's no particular strategy behind it. The first thing I can say is that it simply fascinates me to include all that shit, that filth, because I am really opposed to the idea that if it is all polished and spruced up that it is somehow better. Many of the trash images that I have included contain more truth than the whole art-nonsense. Somebody like Ruff, for instance, with those soft-focus porn images so that people can hang them up in their offices, that is a really cowardly attitude. He's imitating Richter by doing it, because he painted soft-focus porn in the Fifties. They are just chicken. Nowadays there's no risk of censorship. It's more an aesthetic risk. It makes me laugh, too; it's not all meant to be so serious. But you have to stand by it, and I stand by it. It's like this today: if you leaf through one of those magazines, then there are those cultural critic who say that that's the absolute pits; there's a picture of a corpse and on the next page you have some porn. But they use it for the same voyeuristic reasons. They just pretend to be moralistic. But that also means that both things are slumbering within you—the curiosity and if you take another step, at what point does the fascination turn into sorrow, for example, when you see a dead body? Where does this level still work with an audience or normal people, to break through this carapace, so that they might say: it is a crime to send people to war. That's why there isn't a proper anti-war movement these days, because the feeling ...

... because they see it constantly.

... because they don't see it at all.

They see it so often that they can no longer see it.

That's also not right. For it is all just pretend. It's not really shown.

Not felt.

No, not felt. In the Forties there were some American psychologists who managed to treat people so that they could withstand the effect of someone being shot right next to them. That is a problem. How do you re-induce anger at stuff like that?



But aren't you repeating this to a certain extent? For example with the porn images: at the beginning you may have some effect. But at some point the effect is exhausted. After the fifth book and the 500th backside, you have had enough ...

But on the other hand you don't actually read all 3000 pages at one go. New combinations arise perpetually. It might well be that it's too much. The whole thing is more open through the website. The book has a fixed sequence. With the Internet you dip in and out. What we are now finishing is just one possibility. I could arrange it quite differently. I can control things much better with the film, because I am permanently working on it, that's why it isn't finished. The first and the third roll, they are more or less OK as far as I am concerned, I am not likely to mess about with it any further. Nothing much has changed in it in two years. One argument in favour of this sheer mass of material is perhaps, put quite bluntly, that at some point it bores you, I've had enough. I've had enough after three hours of Schönberg, I need to hear something different for a change. Maybe that's the same with the book perhaps—chuck it, let's read something different for a change. That's why it is important to have these different possibilities. The whole of art is slick and clean, they've been doing the same thing for the past 20 years. The people who interest me, for example Francis Picabia, they would do several different things at the same time, they worked in different styles and weren't bothered in the slightest. For example, Picabia, he did those sex pictures, which he copied from sex magazines. These ones here [WH fetches an illustrated volume of Picabia's work from the shelf]. But he altered a lot, it's not as simple as it looks. Look at this, he painted that in 1945, just imagine. And up to ten years ago these images were considered to be absolute filth. These pictures are now the ones that fetch the highest prices. These different levels interest me. And this has worked with both the film and the book. My own stuff starts to get tedious for me after a while. If I were to see one of my old films today I'd probably walk out after ten minutes.

But it's not just the website, the book is also interactive to an extent, because you flip through it and determine what you are going to look at. Film is different again.

You only get the film with me.

That means when you no longer exist then the film doesn't exist either.

Jack Smith only finished two films in his life, *Flaming Creatures* and *No President*, they were genuinely complete works, everything else wasn't. He still kept on showing them. Then he died in 1989 and Jerry Tartaglia—that's how it works—more or less reconstructed it as he imagined it to be. That would mean that when I croak then that would be it, the version now just as it is. That is—Tartaglia said it at the Jack Smith performance at the Berlinale yesterday—an approach. I said in London that I wouldn't want to show my films at the Goethe-Institute, I hate that place. So I showed the film in the Horse Hospital. I felt good there. It was great, I felt great. Everybody was in a great mood, they didn't really understand very much, but they were in a good mood, I noticed that; you can tell whether the applause is just polite or genuinely enthusiastic. That was a performance nobody could do without me, I have to call the tune, I set and change the tone, search for something different that might fit better ...

You are a kind of MC ...

... for example *König der Froschschenkel* [King of the Frogslegs], it was once shown as a single support film at the Berlinale, I incorporated it in *You Killed ...*; it's in the film with different sound. I edited out the title. Gottfried Benn for example, he held talks in the Fifties, I used to think that can't be, there's something missing from the book on the LP—he simply left sections out. He said that the era of straight, linear narratives is over, it's just boring.

Do you want to narrate?

I want to narrate. At any rate I do tell stories, really big stories about history, feelings, but not narrative stories.

Is that in any way different to Kurt Kren [Austrian filmmaker, d. 1998]? Does he tell stories?

He seems to have made purely formalistic films. All of his films, apart from a few, are more or less abstract. When he takes the heads from the Szondi test, that is faces from a psychological test, and when you then think what that means to take faces, these faces, he, as a half Jewish person had to hide, the Nazis categorized everything, well, there are an unbelievable amount of sub

stories. That's why Kurt Kren is one of the most important people because beneath the surface there are a lot of sub stories, everything has a meaning. Only it's stricter, shorter because Kren was a different person, he was coming from that Viennese tradition, twelve-tone music and so on, it has a lot to do with his personality, he was a different sort of guy.

Were you ever interested in being shown on TV?

No. Birgit Hein and I did a documentary about Andy Warhol for the *Westkunst* exhibition held in Cologne in 1979. Everything that was planned ended up being mutilated and castrated. Absolutely not. I would sell it to them if they'd take it just as it is. My credo is "Fuck the Idiot Box." I mean it seriously.

To what extent have the distribution channels changed since the Seventies? XSCREEN in Cologne, independent and underground film festivals everywhere in Europe, this distribution and networking was a large part of your work—I can't really say anything about it as I wasn't there. But these are all things that no longer exist. A lot of people would prefer to be on television, 'Arte Themenabend', the ZDF's 'Kleine Fernsehspiel', et cetera [note: topical magazine programmes like the BBC's 'Panorama']. Your meetings remind me a little of those media festivals in the Nineties—the coming together was by virtue of the ideal of freedom, but now we have the Internet, electronic music and new media, we have so many more possibilities now and can do everything differently.

I don't think that anything has changed. It is just that it's still not visible. In the Sixties—what is now viewed with nostalgia, I am not nostalgic—there was the FilmCoop based in Hamburg, they were just hippy losers to us. It was a big lie. There were people who had a place with the possibility and conditions for production and that was OK.

The next step, at least the radicalization of it in showing the films, were things like "undependent film centre" in Munich and XSCREEN in Cologne. That was a totally different dimension, a quantum leap. That is to say that even then the radical position was severely limited. But the audiences were more open—it was generally so stuffy in those days that such things really stood out and made a massive splash. We showed Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* in front of 800 people in the biggest cinema in Cologne, which

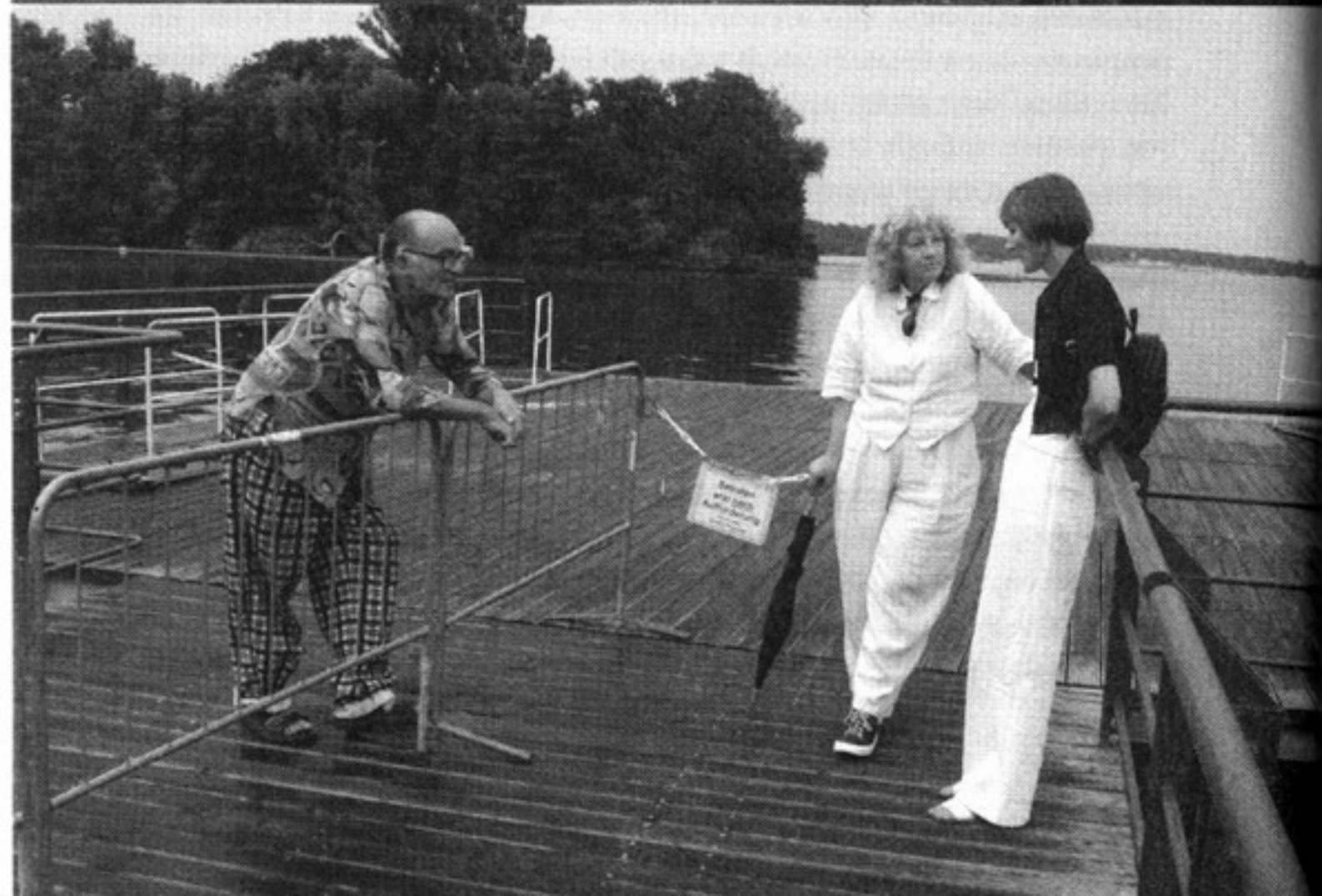
we had leased through the night, in front of normal people, not a highbrow cultured audience, but in a normal cinema, just try to imagine that happening nowadays, they were simply really curious about what was happening. They said: we've got to see it! But it was an illusion. It was every much an event as the ones today, event culture, it too was an event, it was *the* event. It wasn't porn, it was an event, because no one else would show it. Do you think for a minute that serious ... serious means for me people who really understand what is going on. It is an elite. Mass enthusiasm, that's rubbish. Where does it come from? It is an illusion. Event culture is a conjuring trick. How do I fool the people? You can't say that all the Kunstvereine are all full of shit, you just can't do it. There are just as many opportunists as before, only that the whole art spectacle is much broader—Allianz Insurance as an artwork and all of that stuff, that's just absurd. Something can still be done, but ultimately ... from a work point of view, it's not on, it's impossible.

Be that as it may, film was still a new medium for you; was it not?

Film was something new, yes—our mistake at that time, I can only say this of myself, was to regard the commercial film as an adversary, because it wasn't an adversary, that's ridiculous. It was just a fixed idea: we are opposed to commercial cinemas! We didn't really have anything to do with it, it was an erroneous, adolescent assumption. Situations of struggle, there were the TV people, we threw them all out. It was a cult happening because of this action. Then there were group processes, people came in who fitted better, which was positive enough, but it's all relative. Above all, we weren't saints. We were just as corrupt as everybody else.

But the films were new. And these films nowadays are being shown in museums, arts cinemas in the Goethe-Institute, in universities. Are you at all bothered where they are being shown or are you just concerned about the films themselves?

I am interested in the films. There isn't a place—it would be ideal if I showed you something here at home, that's how we used to do it, they were the dream presentations. A whole load of people were invited, we sat ourselves down, drank beer and watched the films. Of course, it is a bit of an esoteric corner you get stuck in. The problem is always when it spreads outwards; that's when it starts, that's when it gets overtaken. What we did then, Birgit



and I—it's quite an important story—we made propaganda for this form of cinema. We put a tremendous amount of energy into it, took part in the *documenta*, but it came to absolutely nothing. It was absurd. Michael Snow came from Canada, played in front of 20 people in a 1,000 seater cinema and outside the streets were teeming with people—it was absurd! Totally ridiculous! Nobody came! No one wants to see a film during the opening of the *documenta*. But the good thing was: during the 100 days—one film programme per day—we started in the mornings, the directors whom we had invited, the underground people, showing ten films per day, it was a complete programme—it was great. The people who were interested came. It was very laid back, we had our daily programme, it was listed precisely: this film is playing at this time, that one then, you could choose, it was serious. But it didn't achieve anything.

Does Underground still mean something today? What is it? Is it an attitude? The term has been somewhat worn out. However, in principle when I use the term "underground film" then I mean an attitude. It is an attitude of mind. Refusal. Refusal, at least in one's artistic work. I have to split them up otherwise I'd be dead. I have to follow the path of fooling people, I fool them and say: Try and play that. And then they play it and the good thing is: it works! But they don't do it off their own bat. For example, this Holocaust film, I argued with this woman, the festival director in Israel, she said to me there were no Jews there, and I said Jews were transported there, to Natzweiler near Strasbourg, that was the clinic where they placed an order for Jewish women, they needed a skeleton. Then they said they weren't good enough, send them away and then they ordered more new women, and said these are better, we'll take them now. Then they murdered them and then they were made ready for preparation. Fact. But whenever you talk about it: no, it can't be. When you work in this area, I can only talk about film, then you come across people who link themselves into the network, who are enormously important, who haven't been discovered yet. There's a lot of stuff, it's already been in all the books, stuff in the Eighties in New York, the "Cinema of Transgression." There are two or three well-known people, for example Nick Zedd [note: in 1985 Nick Zedd came up with the expression "Cinema of Transgression" in order to describe an underground film movement based in New York]. A number of people in this group kind of went off the radar,

then suddenly they were discovered. David Wojnarowicz made a film with people in it who are not famous—that was the underground twenty years ago; the real radical oppositional movement in America against this academic, formalistic structural film rubbish, which has spread out more and more. And they didn't stand a chance, they were totally negated. They started producing their own fanzines, these people, Nick Zedd and consorts, they made their own propaganda. That is to say this circle keeps on repeating itself. I am not really au fait with it all; I don't know at the moment what kind of people are around. It's like this: as regards the present, we only find out what's happening in the powerhouses, in the universities, and that's the most god-awful shit. These professors are intent on consciously breeding a mainstream. Because they constitute the mainstream themselves, otherwise they wouldn't be there forever, with a few exceptions, because not every professor is an idiot. But about 90% of the people in the universities are complete idiots holding onto their comfy little tenured posts. And they have created this mainstream and it takes up all the space and that's the problem. And there's a resistance building up in front of this close door that will give these people a kick in the backside one of these days. What are you supposed to do otherwise? You can't live at home with your mum and then have her come along and bail you out of jail.

I am not so sure. If you argue that way today people will all too quickly reproach you for being old-fashioned ...

So what, it doesn't matter.

... it's tied in with economic structures. Everybody let Mercedes sponsor him or her these days.

Four people could live in this flat each paying 100 €. Everything is possible.

Isn't it more the problem for you nowadays to maintain your position in the underground?

Schlingensief is a classic example of how he finds themes and content and uses everything. Otto Mühl hasn't had a single exhibition in a museum in Germany. It doesn't matter what you think of him, or of the Vienna Actionists, it's a central figure. Schlingensief took it up and then filled Bayreuth with shit. With the belittlement of these things. You can't imitate something that

has been dealt with already, something that had already been done some thirty or forty years ago. Even Mühl wouldn't have thought of repeating these actions. In those days it was explosive material, but only possesses historic relevance today, apart from a few points, which still make you catch your breath. If you were to do it today, it would be ludicrous.

Can Schlingensief be identified as one of the "Yous" in 'You Killed the Underground Film ...'?

I am one of those "Yous", too, so it's not that straight forward ...

It was probably about something else in that case. They are also reciprocal relationships, what was before and what will come after? The Fifties preceded the Sixties: immediate post-war circumstances, economic upturn, nuclear family, materialism and so on. And you wanted to break through all of that. We are the children of the hippy generation. It's all false, freedom and such—they were totally frustrated that they couldn't afford anything. And here money has got something to do with the relevance you are talking about. Whereas where you were concerned, the freedom of expression was a decisive element for this relevance, could it be that one might consider it equally relevant today, that an entity can survive, at least has a possibility of surviving in times of globalization. That is an attitude.

Nick Zedd is living on the streets in New York. It works. He makes his films. There are always exceptions. It's clear enough that you want to sell the books, it would be stupid, and I want to show my films. But if that can't happen, then it can't happen. We live off wealthy people's garbage, I understand that. If we are going to talk about this topic—you have to really think precisely about what it means. It is not just restricted to art. Carl Einstein, an important art historian, was never awarded a professorial chair. It was like that in all areas, they just carried on. That's why Grosz is one of the greatest for me, he always forked out for others. He sent off care packages, gave money to people, not much, but whatever he had. And they banned him from the Communist Party. And then he wrote about Paul Zech, he was totally impoverished, he was down and out. He describes it in quite dramatic terms, almost Christ-like. And when a poor thief is down and out, then they say "that's not the faction's problem, that's his private problem." That's the

contradiction. And that is the lie with which you have grown up, in a different form from the one we grew up with. A perpetual double standard.

Exactly. But they believed that it might work, didn't they?
They read it.

Were you left-wing then?

Definitely left-wing of course, but not affiliated. In 1968 we did the cinema in Cologne. There was the "Kommunistische Bund Westdeutschland," then the "KPD Rote Fahne" [Communist Party Red Flag], all these splinter groups from the KPD or German Communist Party and they all showed their films at XSCREEN. We celebrated the Chinese New Year there with the students. "Workers and peasants" that's the kind of terminology they used, can you imagine? There wasn't a single worker, let alone a peasant in the audience. But it was necessary in its way. But nostalgia is an illness.

But that's just what I mean. And then you realize that it doesn't work in this large arena, so you chose a smaller one and then perhaps you arrive at the idea that you might try to create an economically viable little cell ...

That was the idea of these rural communes, all of which finally failed because of these private problems. You can't force people: and now fuck him over there for a change. That's not freedom, it's ludicrous. The real truth of freedom is not anarchy, but self-determination. People have their own needs. To find happiness. And this happiness is destroyed. That's the new terror. They have destroyed your happiness, the others have destroyed your happiness, they want you to be unhappy, and that's the tragedy. And that's the key question. That's the goal of life: happiness. With your identity, with your work, with someone ... You can't survive as a single person, you need another person whom you can trust and above all one you can touch, with whom you can live together. Warmth. And that is always directly associated with sex. That is a sickness that afflicts our society today. You can't embrace anyone anymore because then you think straight away she wants to fuck him. That's where it starts. These anxieties. I once had a dog; it's a similar thing with the dog. It turns up during the night, lies down at your feet and then disappears again. The dog needs that warmth, the contact. What else do you need to know?

To what extent can you make yourself independent without actually destroying yourself?

Well, I lost my voice. For years I had no voice. Just a croaky little voice, like the one you have when your voice breaks. It was a nightmare. I am no saint; you've got to be careful. But you have to try. Finding your identity is the point, not the underground.

Berlin, February 10, 2007