

Pesch, Katrin. "No No Wave." Text for Film Program curated for *Now and 10 Years Ago - On the Relationship between Cultural Production and Urban Development*, curated by Axel John Wieder, Stefan Dilleuth and Josef Strau, Kunstwerke Berlin, 2004.

No No Wave - Film Notes

A Selection of Films Produced in New York between 1978-1986

This cultural construction 'bohemia' is continuously carbonated by music, film, television, and advertising, window-dressed for sale in cycles of generation and appropriation that, while decades old, have become increasingly sophisticated and entangled, even vivified, with irony. Nonetheless, people still live for this fugitive and often-prostituted ideal, understanding themselves as revolutionaries, criminals, and whores. Bohemia contains real aspiration and real human stories – the raw material of narrative art.¹

The short film *Not a Warhol Factory* by David Blair documents an installation and performance of artist Mike Bidlo, which was presented in 1984 at P.S. 1 in Long Island City, New York. Photocopied or silk-screened Marylins hang on the walls. The rooms themselves are populated with people whose appearance and costumes simultaneously reference the 'fun-chic' of the early eighties and the glamour of Warhol's Factory. Bidlo himself strolls through the screen as Warhol; someone else wears a Marilyn Monroe dress. All of those present mimic various roles - revolutionaries, criminals, and whores - from a chapter in the script of the avant-garde, which has already been commercialized and become a part of the canon of art history. Tropes of underground, stardom, art and commerce are played upon here - half in love, half tauntingly, rather foolishly yet with much energy. The allusion to the then-hype of the East Village art scene is evident. 'Meanwhile in a room next door' a subtitle states, to segue into the next and final scene: here one sees the workers of this 'factory' at the silkscreen press. With this, the film documentation brings to mind questions of the conditions of production and hierarchy within the field of culture to the foreground.

A focus on the conditions and surrounding environment of production led to the selection of the following films, and this is sometimes reflected in the films themselves. The theme of appropriation, more specifically stated, the appropriation of genres, styles, or role models as a method for critical recontextualization, which was initially considered as the conceptual

¹ Moore, Alan und Jim Cornwell, "Local History. The Art of Battle for Bohemia in New York." In: *Alternative Art New York 1965-1985*, ed. Julie Ault, 321-365, Minneapolis, 2002, p. 324

framework for the film program, receded to the background and became less important during the research process. However, various forms of appropriation have been introduced in these films, for example the feminist appropriation of production means in *Cave Girls* by Kiki Smith and Ellen Cooper, or the hard-fought appropriation of emotional as well as urban spaces in *The Man Who Envied Women* by Yvonne Rainer.

She Had Her Gun All Ready (1978) by Vivienne Dick

Vivienne Dick's early films came about in the context of the so-called Punk/No Wave scene in New York in the late seventies. The term No Wave can be understood as an ironical negation of New Wave. *No New York* was the title of an album by the Contortions, DNA, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, and Mars, four New York bands that experimented with sounds between Noise and Free Jazz.² In the booklet of the 2003 compilation *NY NO Wave*, Mara Missangas writes: "In the late seventies the No Wave bands created their own apocalyptic soundtrack of New York, self critical, riddled with arrogant doubts, these 'brats' were their own worst enemies as well as their own best friends. Self-destructing and parodist chaos, playing the wrong note at the right time."³ The audio of this apocalyptic soundtrack was soon followed by a film track as visual counterpart: according to a myth the No Wave film scene emerged, because someone was distributing 'hot' Super-8 cameras, normally sold for around \$600 a piece, for a tenth of the price: "Everybody got one."⁴ On the one hand, one can read this anecdote within the context of the financial bankruptcy of New York at the time, and the resulting drastic economical constrictions of many residents; on the other hand, there is also a hint of the old Punk ethic, that anyone who knows how to operate a Super-8 camera, or who has one at his/her disposal, can be filmmaker.

² Negation nowadays seems to be less a topic than reference: in 2003 songs of such New York bands as The Strokes and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs were released on a compilation called *Yes New York*.

³ Mara Missangas, *N.Y No Wave: Lower East Side Story*. The CD was released 2003 on zerecords and notably is called *N.Y NO Wave. The Ultimate 80s East Village Soundtrack*, even though all songs but one are from the years 1978/79.

⁴ Charlie Ahearn, quoted after G.H. Hovagimyan, <http://old.thing.net/ttreview/octrev96.03.html>

The parodic appropriation of various (mainstream) film genres can be found as a recurring method in many productions of the time. Through a mixture of ironic distancing, aggression, and shoulder-shrugging lightness, a filmic approach develops in which the subversive-visionary ambitions of the filmmakers are constantly played off against the scarcity of available means: as in Eric Mitchell's *Kidnapped* (1978), a parody of Warhol's *Vinyl*, in the derisive film noir *Sleepless Night* (1978) by Becky Johnston or the films of Scott and Beth B., whose choice of name indicates their enthusiasm for B-Movies.⁵ B. stands for a palette of themes including criminality, violence and sex, but also creative control and trash-appeal. Furthermore, the involvement of one's own surroundings, partially in (self-made) costumes as in James Nares' *Rome '78*, a sword-and-sandal epic shot on location in Downtown New York, places No Wave films in the tradition of filmmakers of the sixties, for instance the Kuchar Brothers, who use their neighborhood in the Bronx, including the neighbors, to re-stage Hollywood melodramas.

Due to her determined usage of the raw Super-8 format, in film criticism of the early eighties Vivienne Dick's films were seen in context with a revival of the anti-aesthetic of the sixties underground film. The filmmaker and critic J. Hoberman describes Vivienne Dick as a quintessential Super-8 filmmaker, since all the traditional narrow gauge genres overlap in her films: urban documentation, confessional psychodrama, ironic spectacle, as well as diary-like home video sequences.⁶ In an interview from 1983, Vivienne Dick neither places much worth on her films being included under the label of No Wave, nor that she is considered as a film maker in the context of a tradition of avant-garde film (a position that one could in turn consider very No Wave).⁷ Certainly, Dick states, her early films are punk in that they include musicians who acted or made the soundtracks, and the films themselves were often shown in corresponding clubs.⁸ She collaborated with people and made experimental films in an atmosphere that was not as "heavy" as at Anthology Film Archives or Millennium: "I met all these people who were talking about making films, people like Eric Mitchell and James Nares – the group that started Colab. They were getting together to talk about a film grand. Someone had a projector and someone else had this or that, and they helped each other out." The film experiment *Guériellère*

⁵ See Hoberman, J., "A Context for Vivienne Dick." *October*, No. 20 (Spring 1982), 102-106, here p. 103

⁶ See Hoberman, J., "A Context for Vivienne Dick." *October*, No. 20 (Spring 1982), 102-106, here p. 104

⁷ See MacDonald, Scott, "Interview with Vivienne Dick." *October*, No. 20, (Spring 1982), p. 82-100

⁸ For a short period of time actor, filmmaker and Underground-Entrepreneur Eric Mitchell opened the New Cinema on 2 Avenue, the name of which also coined the scene. However, running an underground cinema proved to be way more expensive than the production of the movies being shown therein.

Talks came out of a series of improvisations with static or moving camera: Composed of 8 individual film rolls each with the screen tests of an actress (including Vivienne Dick herself) – in the broadest sense as preparation for a utopian, feministic film project based on Monique Wittig’s classic *Les Guérillères*.

In *She Had Her Gun All Ready*, Vivienne Dick follows two of these performers with her camera: Lydia Lunch and Pat Place. Again, the view of the camera is implemented not as a neutral observational perspective, but rather appears much more actively to participate in the filmic events. With fragmentary observations, which are staged in various urban locations, the film observes the power relationship between the two women. One is spellbound by the other, paralyzed, and haunted. She can’t get away, feels simultaneously impressed and put under pressure. Various media spaces are entangled in the gaze relationship between the two: while Lydia Lunch is flipping through the TV channels, the face of Pat Place suddenly appears on the monitor; in the next scene Lydia Lunch suddenly disappears from Pat Place’s gaze. Small displacements of perception and everyday observations are allowed much space: what does it mean when one constantly puts the wrong coins in the telephone out of sheer nervousness, and the person on the other end, when finally reached, has no time to talk, is just about to leave?

The latent violence - first subtle, then openly unraveled in the progression of the film - structures the relationship between the two performers, and in an increasingly hostile atmosphere their relationship advances - until the grand finale on the roller coaster at Coney Island. In dealing with the theme of violence, Vivienne Dick also resorts back to extremely charged, sensational stories, as in Lydia Lunch reading a story of a serial murderer aloud, which is later dramatized in the splatter-film *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

***Cave Girls* (1981) by Kiki Smith and Ellen Cooper, with Music from Bush Tetras and Y Pants**

Cave Girls came about through a collaboration of artists and musicians out of the scene of the artists group Colab (Collaborative Projects Inc.). With the discovery of a music cassette, a feminist-futuristic narrative of sorts begins. Further excavations reveal more and more photographs and film stock: the discovered materials deliver indisputable proof of a pre-historic Cave Girl Society, according to the narrator’s report from the ‘Woman Task Force of the Future - History Department.’ Film clips show the cave girls in airy fantasy-inspired attire pursuing their

everyday activities: climbing, throwing stones, hanging around and smoking - good times. According to the narrator, this community was not characterized as agrarian: fieldwork, one could conclude, or work in general, was not yet evident in this golden age. No written chronicles were passed down, however through the implementation of state-of-the-art technology, a trace of audio has been uncovered: "... I hear a noise that carries in the distance a drum beat", a voice explains.

A music cassette introduces the journey into the past, and music is also the binding element, which fosters continuity between the pre-historic cave girls and bands from the early eighties. In the second part, the video of the cave girl footage transforms into a music video of the bands Y Pants and Bush Tetras (featuring Pat Place). A simultaneously earnest yet ironically fractured debate with feminine identity and essentialist feminism, the film *Cave Girls* is distinguished by the strategy of formulating a political concern - girl power! – via a historical detour. Through the resulting distance, a radical fictionality of the production is made possible, and is dramatized using various media of art making (in this case film and video, extensive research, music, costume, group collaboration, etc). The critique of the reductionistic image of women as constructed through mass media and the insistence on the relevance of a feministic appropriation of technological means is quite literal: cables are soldered, measuring devices and mixers are shown in close-ups. The method of distribution was also of relevance: the video was shown on public television in the context of the artists' TV network Potato Wolf by Peter Fend. As a decidedly collective undertaking, *Cave Girls* is the playful precursor to Lizzie Borden's feminist film classic *Born in Flames*, which was released two years later.

***Wild Style* (1982) by Charlie Ahearn**

Hey, how're you doing...? That's the union. My Crew. That's our graffiti. We have a few jobs lined up. Murals. Shop signs. ... trying to do a lot for the community now ... Trying to liven up a few things.

So welcomes Rose aka. Lady Pink Fabara, underground graffiti-queen, the reporter Virginia aka. Patti Astor, underground film star and director of the FUN gallery for graffiti art in the East Village. But really, everybody in *Wild Style* is a star. In one scene the reporter's car breaks down in the Bronx on her way to an interview with the graffiti union. In response to her question, where she can find the graffiti artists, the kids surrounding her car scream in one voice:

“We are all graffiti artists!” The mode of narration shifts between self-portrayal and self-mockery; and regarding the projections of the bourgeois white establishment about graffiti and ‘life’ in the ‘ghetto’ that are implicitly evoked, the performers only roll their eyes.⁹

Along the fictional story of the legendary sprayer Zoro, *Wild Style* portrays Hip-Hop and Graffiti culture at the beginning of the eighties from a fan perspective and for fans. “I was interested in making a pop movie”, says Charlie Ahearn, an artist and filmmaker, who was also involved in Colab, in retrospect: “I knew that I should be documenting this thing, but I hated the idea of making a documentary. So the question is how can I make a pop movie out of this thing? ... There was no historical perspective. Let’s go on this trip, it’s like a cartoon version of what was happening.”¹⁰ The union in *Wild Style* is possibly based on the graffiti-mural-group of Fred Braithwaite and Lee Quinones, who in 1979 advertised graffiti for ‘5\$ per square foot’ in a New York city magazine. Three years later, when Lee Quinones, at the side of Fab Fred 5 as Hip Hop impresario Phade, played Zoro and his encounter with the art world in the penthouse of New York collector, he had already been showing his graffiti in galleries for a while. The film thematizes the split relationship between radical, criminalized outsider art and its appropriation through life style publications and the art scene.¹¹

In its endeavor to show a specific scene through a quasi-fictional story, *Wild Style* in many ways can be compared to *Downtown 81* (Dir. Edo Bertoglio), which was shot in 1981, but has only been distributed recently. Here, the graffiti artist Jean-Michel Basquiat rambles through the streets Lower East Side und clubs in Downtown as poor artist Jean. *Downtown 81* features Punk/No Wave and Disco. *Wild Style* is a Hip Hop film: Long musical performances interrupt the graffiti tale to resume from a different perspective, that is, directly from the “pantheon of hip hop’s pioneers.”¹² These, in their casual matter of course impressive recordings range from DJ-sets in Rap and Break dance clubs, staged MC-battles on basketball courts up to a final show in an amphitheater in the Lower East Side, as some kind of social Hip Hop graffiti

⁹ Yet the anthropological point of view is inevitably inscribed, as Los Angeles – based artist Mike Kelley pointed out facetiously in his 1985 essay *Urban Gothic*: “While there we notice the curious pictographic markings made by the natives. Spray-painted scrawls cover everything. ... We are lucky enough to capture some of these primitive artists as well as a few *bruit* musicians. We plan to bring them back with us to our own neighborhood for entertainment.” In: Kelley, Mike, *Foul Perfection*, ed. John Welchman, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003, p.86

¹⁰ http://www.djhistory.com/djhistory/archiveInterviewDisplay.php?interview_id=13

¹¹ For the ending of graffiti’s short guest performance in the galleries, see John Miller: Title, p. in this volume

¹² See <http://www.wildstylethemovie.com/home.htm>

gesamtkunstwerk. With, among others: DJs Grand Master Flash, Grand Wizard Theodore, D.St.; rappers Grand Master Caz and The Cold Crush Bros, The Chief Rocker Busy Bee, Double Trouble, Fantastic Freaks, RAMMELLZEE, bboy champions The Rock Steady Crew and Chris Stein.

The Man Who Envied Women (1985) by Yvonne Rainer

Let's begin somewhere: In 1950 a draft for a political criminal law in the Federal Republic of Germany contained the following sentence: 'The danger to the community comes from organized people.'

This title sequence opens Yvonne Rainer's film *Journeys from Berlin/1971* (1980), in which the dancer, choreographer and filmmaker takes up the story of Ulrike Meinhof to deal with questions of political organization, state authority, terrorism and psychiatry in the Federal Republic of Germany and the United States of America. Yvonne Rainer's engagement with power structures and the (im)possibility of communication is also at the center of her next film, *The Man Who Envied Women*. Here she interweaves the chronicle of a separation and the connotated power politics within the gender relation with the political situation of the districts Lower East Side and Soho as well as the role of the USA in Latin America. By doing so micro-political, emotional events are constantly related to macro-political interrelation, such as the state of city or world politics. Yet a causally determined overall context between the two is negated in the narration. The personal is political indeed - but, states Rainer, "The personal and the political are not synonymous."¹³

Interspersed with the fictional story of the film is documentary footage of two political organizations in which the New York art world around Yvonne Rainer was involved: Artist Call Against Intervention in Central America, for one thing and the Artist Homeownership Program (AHOP)¹⁴, for another, whose advocates faced resident representatives of the Lower East Side in negotiations. When the protagonist loses the lease of her apartment, she realizes that if she

¹³ Rainer, Yvonne, *Talking Pictures. Filme, Feminismus, Psychoanalyse*, Wien: Passagen Verlag, 1994, p. 38.

¹⁴ A measure to create city sponsored artist housing in the Lower East Side. For detailed description of AHOP, see Rosayn Deutsche, *The Fine Art of Gentrification*, p. in this volume

would sign up for a city sponsored Artist Housing Program she would contribute to the displacement of the current residents, in this case the Puerto Rican minority.

In her movies Rainer works with and against conventions of film narrative. The female protagonist stays removed from the viewers gaze, whereas two different actors alternately portray the man. Frequently he is shown in psychoanalytic sessions in front of projections of famous scenes from film noir, melodrama or art films. Language also plays an important role. However, it doesn't serve to fill the empty space between the actors with narrative action, but rather to critically question language conventions and parlance. Especially in two scenes the force of language is staged in a distinctively spatial way: a lecture, held by the male protagonist in a freshly renovated loft condominium, which through its mere length and non-significance is reduced to absurdity. Slow tracking shots demonstrate the loft's market value and express a critique of the complacency of theoretical performance. The critique of rhetorical power positions in the theoretical arena is continued in a later scene. This 'battle of the sexes' - a choreography for a woman and a man as a theoretical exchange of blows on the hopelessness of heterosexual politics - most fittingly takes place in the hallway to the toilets.

Trailer for *Where Evil Dwells* (1986) by Tommy Turner and David Wojnarowicz

The script that Tommy Turner and David Wojnarowicz wrote for *Where Evil Dwells* developed from their research on the case of a 'satanic' teenager, who killed another boy and, subsequently, took his own life in jail. Ricky Kasso was the leader of a group of kids in North Port in the suburbs of Long Island, who take drugs together, listen to heavy metal and share a vague interest for the occult. The authors saw Ricky Kasso's story as the tragic culmination of teenage rebellion. Furthermore, they constructed the story of the boy as a parable to relationships of power in American society.

In a country where an actor becomes the only acceptable president, a country where fewer than half of those eligible to vote even bother to do so – and when they do they elect for two terms a man whose vocation is to persuade with words and actions an audience who wants to believe whatever he tells them – in this context violence presents a truth that can't be distorted like words and images.¹⁵

¹⁵ David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, New York: Vintage Books, 1991, p. 172. According to the US Census Bureau 62% of registered voters cast their ballot in the presidential election of 2000. After "problems" in the election process, mainly in electoral districts with Afro-American or elderly voters, the

Tommy Turner is, among other things, a filmmaker and actor in the context of the so-called Cinema of Transgression.¹⁶ Those affiliated set out to confront America's double moral standards with explicit depictions of sex and violence. David Wojnarowicz is mostly known for his writings and visual work, which attack the marginalization of homosexuality and the stigmatization and ignorance of AIDS in the ultra-conservative climate under the Reagan administration. "We were using the script to talk about relationships of power: how the leader was given power by the other kids and even though he was kind of stupid, the other kids' adulation and respect kept him propped up there in control. Its kind of like Ronald Reagan."¹⁷

Due to a lack of funds and because part of the film material was destroyed in a fire, the film was never completed. In the opening sequence of the trailer the title *Where Evil Dwells* is being sprayed on the image of a suburban home. Here in the suburbs and social structures such as the nuclear family, the sequence seems to suggest to the viewer, it is where evil dwells, and not like the media comments to the contrary, in Kasso's fondness of the occult and heavy metal.¹⁸ Consequently the devil in *Where Evil Dwells*, as seen in the hallucinations of the leader, is portrayed as a perverted father figure, sporting a suit and cigar.

Starting from Ricky's story the script is nothing less than the narrative adaptation of a psycho-geographic analysis of teenage isolation and alienation in the suburbs following several stages: from humiliation and violence in the parental living room the path leads to hanging on the streets, and to all that, which in psychological jargon is called 'teenage delinquency' – going as far as a brutal murder. Very indebted to the genre of the splatter film the trailer of *Where Evil Dwells* is a consistently increasing build up of playing the feeling of powerlessness off against power fantasies, which follow the protagonist until his death. The representation of the Beyond features several spatial metaphors from late capitalist consumer culture: consequently heaven is a fancy restaurant and Jesus an overweight, chicken leg-chomping glutton. Anyhow, Ricky is

outcome of the 2000 election was decided by the Supreme Court. In the run up to the elections in November 2004, expected to be similarly narrow, there were reports of intimidation, harassment and suppression of voters.

¹⁶ Propagated by Nick Zedd through a manifesto of the same title, in which he positions himself against structuralist film, the academy, film theory, etc.

¹⁷ Wojnarowicz, David, *Close to the Knives*, New York: Vintage Books, 1991, p. 206.

¹⁸ See Sargeant, Jack, *Deathtripping The Cinema of Transgression*, London 1995, p. 125.

refused entrance to the restaurant, but thrown in the gin palace downstairs.¹⁹ Eternal gentrification?

Film Notes, in: *Now and 10 Years Ago - Zum Verhältnis von Kulturproduktion und Stadtentwicklung*, ed. Axel John Wieder, Stefan Dilleuth and Josef Strau. Texts and contributions by: John Miller, Alan Moore, Rosalyn Deutsche, Katrin Pesch and the participants, Berlin: Revolver Verlag, (forthcoming)

Film Notes is the accompanying text for a film and video program, which was screened in the context of the exhibition *Now and 10 Years Ago* at Kunst-Werke Berlin e.V. in 2004. The program presented a selection of films produced in New York between 1978-1986.

Vivienne Dick, *She Had Her Gun Already*, 26 min, 1978 (Super-8 transferred to DVD)

Kiki Smith/Ellen Cooper, *Cave Girls*, 28 min, 1982 (VHS transferred to DVD)

Charlie Ahearn, *Wild Style*, 82 min, 1983, (16 mm transferred to DVD)

David Blair/Mike Bidlo, *Not A Warhol Factory*, 1984 (VHS transferred to DVD)

Yvonne Rainer, *The Man Who Envied Woman*, 125 min, 1985 (16 mm transferred to DVD)

Tommy Turner/David Wojnarowicz, *Where Evil Dwells*, 34 min, 1986 (Super 8 transferred to DVD)

¹⁹ The performance group Survival Research Laboratories provided pyrotechnic effects for the hell scene. The soundtrack blares out the title theme by Wiseblood and a collection of assaulted death metal songs.