



Interview to Norbert Pfaffenbichler

By Eddy Baéz

*In October of 2014 the Austrian filmmaker Norbert Pfaffenbichler was part of the 14th **Muestra Internacional del Cine Documental (Doc Buenos Aires)** presenting a program that went through 10 years of his career. The encounter allowed my friends from Hambre to make a first contact with him and arrange this interview, which with great pleasure I have made for them.*



In your works there is a strong conceptual search, nevertheless, there is a clear difference between the films that you make with found footage and the abstract explorations of your first videos. To what influences do these quests respond?

I see my work as a kind of formal and structural research. First I try to understand something for myself because I want to know how things work. I analyze media with their own specifics. When I analyze film the result is not a theoretical text but a film. I always try to do stuff I haven't done before, so it would be boring for me to create abstract works my whole life. After I had done a lot of abstract vid-

eos, live performances and installations I wanted to find a new field. I always had a great interest in film history. Film is a historical medium, it was the most important "new" medium in the 20th century but not anymore. I question film-specific topics with the digital tools of nowadays.

How did it define your work being part of *Austrian abstract cinema*?

I coined the term "Austrian Abstracts" as the title for a series of programs I presented at the Austrian film festival Diagonale over the course of 4 years and which featured more or less abstract videos by



friends of mine and myself. In the beginning there were just a couple of people who experimented with their computers, then more and more people started doing similar things. It basically started with the label Mego, which was a melting pot for musicians who created experimental electronic sounds and graphic designers and video artists who were doing videos and visuals for them. When it became “popular” and “accepted” it was time for me to find a new field of activity. Most of the artists that had started the thing are now doing other things, a handful of the people are still creating abstract works, though.

The first part of the series *Notes on Film* was made in 2002, five years after you began your career. Could you tell us how did the idea of these series emerge?

Notes is a series of works of mine, there are not just *Notes on Film*, I also did *Notes on colors* and other stuff, installations, cd-roms, photographs etc. What I create are not “big pictures” but just some short notes on topics I am interested in. And I am generally interested in notation systems like musical notation, writing and so on and film is a notation system for movement.

In each of these *Notes* you work with film archives of well-known actors and characters. What drives you to select a specific individual, and how do you conceptualize the proposal?



Conference (Notes on Film 05). NP. Austria. 8min. 2011.

I did a movie where a lot of actors impersonate a specific historical person: Adolf Hitler. Hitler is the historical character most often impersonated in film history aside from Jesus Christ. Then I tried to do the opposite: I created two films with just one actor each who impersonates a lot of different characters. I have done two versions, one silent and one with sound, because for me these are two different art forms. I took Lon Chaney and Boris Karloff because both of them really played a lot of different characters. Actors like Douglas Fairbanks, Rudolph Valentino and they like more or less always portray the same hero, so the montage would not be very interesting

In some of your *Notes* you resignify the generic codes of the films you use, creating essays from the reorganization of the original material. We can see that in *Conference*, where the satire and humor are present, and in a mild way (to a lesser extent) in *Intermezzo*. Nevertheless both films invite the spectator to laugh. How do you relate yourself to humor?



Intermezzo (Notes on Film 4). NP. Austria. 2min. 2012

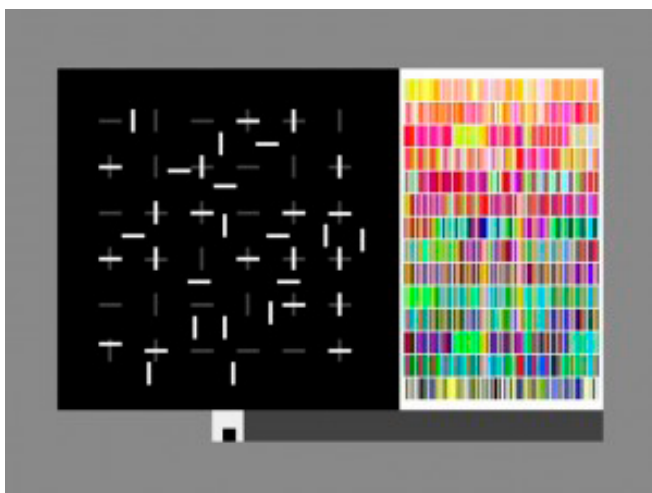
I appreciate when audiences are laughing about my films. As a young man I was very serious about art, but the older I get the harder it is to take anything seriously anymore. I guess one can see this in my work.



The order of your Notes does not respond to a chronology (N. o F. 04 is dated on 2012 and N. o F. 05 on 2011), also from the Note 06 you jump (your works jumps) directly to the Note 09. Could you explain what happens in the middle? How do you organize your Notes?

Notes on Film 08 is called "Short Movie", it's an actual 35mm film consisting, aside from the title and the credits, of just two frames that display the words "BEFORE" and "AFTER". The composer Bernhard Lang did a soundtrack for that movie. Of course the film is too short to be presented in cinemas but it was shown at exhibitions. The other thing is that I work on different parallel projects simultaneously most of the time. For films the official release date is always the date of the first screening and it can happen that the film that was finished earlier had the premiere later.

Beyond your interest for the experimentation with film archives as historic material, in your work there is a constant play with other artistic disciplines. I think of *Notes On Mazy* which is based in a Willi Dorner's choreography, or *Piano Phase* in which you worked over a piece of Steve Reich. Is your work *36* presented in Doc Buenos Aires as part of this search?



36. NP & Lotte Schreiber. Austria. 2min. 2001.

I worked for the choreographer Willi Dorner for about ten years. I did all the videos for his dance pieces during that period. I did a video of one solo dance from one of his dance pieces that was also screened

at film festivals. *Piano Phase* was a commissioned work from the festival ars electronica. My ex-partner Lotte Schreiber and I did a live performance for a Steve Reich concert and the festival produced a DVD of that. *36* also was a collaboration with Lotte Schreiber. She is a trained architect and we did some installations, videos and "percent for art" projects (public art funded by a mandatory investment for large construction projects) together.

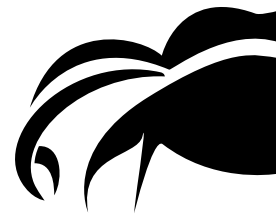
In the selection of films that we saw at the festival, it is clear that sound plays an important role in your work, it does not only give an esthetic coherence but also takes count of your search of different effects (from the "mickey mousing" in *Intermezzo* that resemantizes images of Chaplin with heavy metal to an instrumental music in *A Masque of Madness*).

How do you think the relationship between image and sound?

It's true that music is very important in my work. In cinema sound is as important as the image or sometimes even more important. I have no musical training but I love working with musicians and composers. Except for my early videos for the musician Fennesz I have always edited my films without sound and then given the musicians the final version. All the musicians I work with are friends.

You always work with great musicians; we can say that you are really fortunate for this. I would like to know how is the creative process along Bernhard Lang, who has participated in the majority of your projects.

Especially the work with Bernhard Lang is very important for me. We share a lot of interests, for example for structures, repetition, loops, sampling/found footage and also for horror movies. When I work with him he is involved in the whole process from the early concepts to the final movie. He has always given me good advice and I am thankful for that. Also I am very thankful that he works with me for very little money because I could afford neither



to pay him an adequate composer's salary nor the costs for a real orchestra.

Both of you clearly have a strong inclination towards the experimentation and granulation. *Conference* is a clear example of this, where you work with noise created especially for the film, instead, in *A messenger from the shadows* the proposal is different, you work with a symphony that already exists. What factors do determine your sound choices?

For *Conference* Bernhard Lang used sounds from Chaplin's "Great Dictator" as raw material and ma-

nipulated them for our purposes. The movie should look and sound like it was found in a lake or a bunker or something. I filmed the original scenes, which dated from several decades and whose quality varied wildly, with Super 8 from a computer monitor and Bernhard Lang used a lot of noise filters to create this old and destroyed impression. For *A messenger from the shadows* he used a lot of his own compositions spanning his whole career from his first student pieces to his latest works. I don't think that any other composer but Bernhard Lang would have done what he did – just using all his "serious" compositions, re-editing and manipulating them for a film score.



A messenger from the shadows. NP. Austria. 60min. 2013.