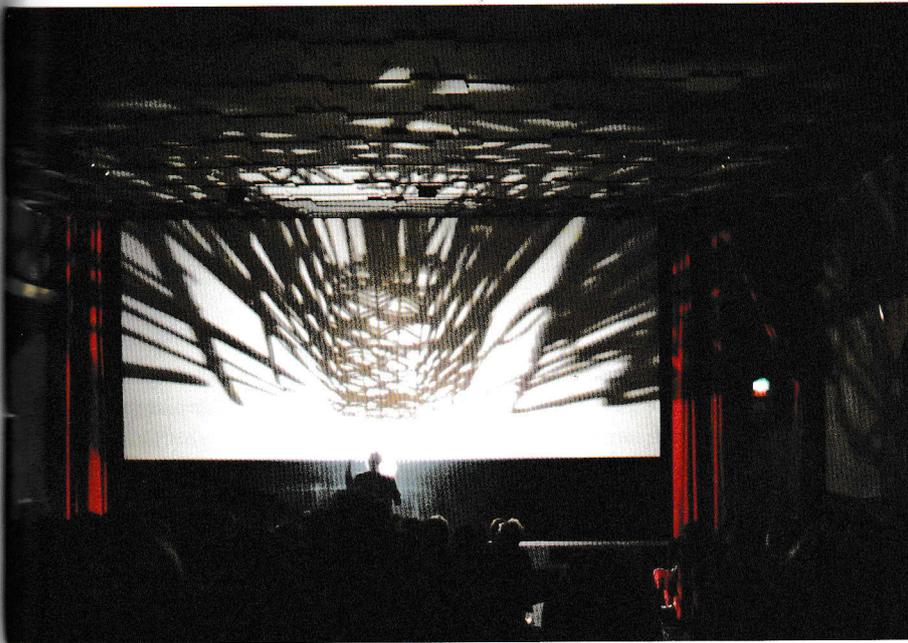


MEMORIES—GOOD OR BAD— CAN'T WAIT

Mika Taanila Curates in Oberhausen



Point Source

*“Everything is very quiet. Everyone has gone to sleep.
I’m wide awake on memories”*

—“MEMORIES CAN’T WAIT,” TALKING HEADS

“dans cinquante mètres, tournez à gauche”

—ÉLOGE DE L’AMOUR, JEAN-LUC GODARD

Back in 2007, during one of the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen’s lively “Podium” discussions held in complement to the late Ian White’s oft-referenced *Kinomuseum* program, Chrissie Iles launched from her laptop a slideshow of cinemas. What is cinema? Well, it’s an architecture, for one, implied the Whitney curator, built specifically to support an art form. From lavish Deco picture palaces to Peter Kubelka’s austere all-black design for the auditorium at Anthology Film Archives, more or less conventional cinema spaces were successively clicked through to drive home a basic premise, forming a prologue of sorts to the panel’s main discussion topic: “Does the museum fail?” The continuation of that sentence being vis-à-vis moving-image works and their too-often cavalier installs within museum and gallery settings. Though in many ways simplistic, this kindergarten-style show-and-tell reinforced cinema’s collective viewing power by highlighting its traditional conditions; Iles, thus, quietly reignited a longstanding debate on what exactly are the tenets of the art of cinema.

That slideshow came to mind on more than one occasion during Oberhausen’s 60th anniversary, whose annually curated theme was this year conceived, developed, and orchestrated by celebrated Finnish filmmaker-artist Mika Taanila. Hugely ambitious in scope and scale, and more ambiguous and amorphous in practice than on paper, the metaphoric and material resonance of the program’s title, *Memories Can’t Wait—Film without Film*, provided a near-endless stream-of-consciousness about a vast terrain—equally metaphoric, material, and meta, but also philosophical and physical—as the program attempted to adhere to an elemental baseline. “Back to the basics,” prof-

ferred Taanila in his introductory essay, suggesting that today's convulsive volcanic eruptions of digital moving images, whose lava flows into every crevice of our lives, could use some reigning in. Perhaps with Michael Fried's defense of Minimalism in mind and his legendary dictum "Presentness is grace," Taanila sought to slice his cinema into constituent parts with emphasis on the formal properties that constitute the seventh art, contiguous with its audience, whose participation is key.

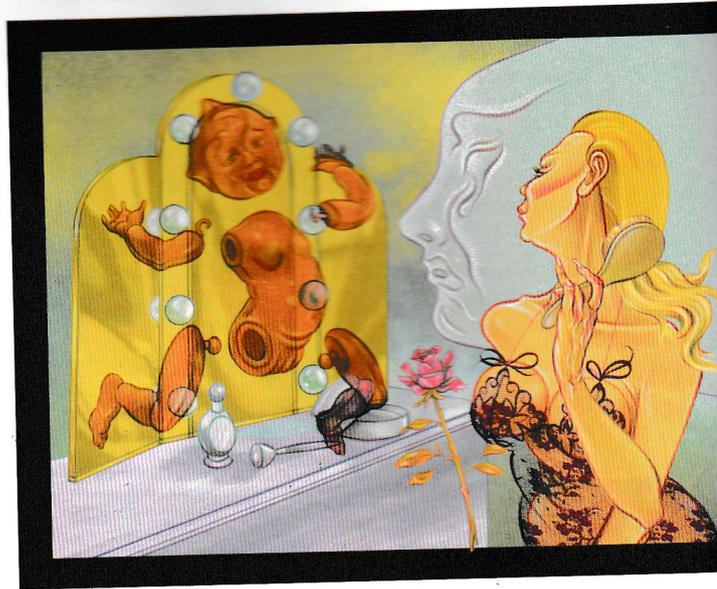
As any cinephile will argue, there is no passivity in the black box. That objective was made playfully clear from the outset when the program launched in a darkened cinema (the Gloria!) filled to capacity and lit by the projector's light reflecting off a blank, white screen. The film (or interactive or expanded cinema) was subsequently created by the audience, at first with mild consternation and good humour as the promotional flyers, which had been quickly discarded from our seats like litter (ones advertising the theatre's upcoming theatrical release schedule, no less!), were suddenly grappled for upon the floor as a few plants in the audience led the way in an epic paper-plane toss. As paper planes—some displaying impressive origamic prowess—were thrown up into the air catching the projector's beam, bisecting the glowing picture plane, others nose-diving into the napes of their neighbours, and one victoriously planting itself into the bottom frame of the screen, lending its shadow for a bit of drama, levity literally filled the cinema. The film that followed, *Hell's Angels* (1969), was one of two works that Taanila unearthed by the late Austrian filmmaker Ernst Schmidt Jr., whose major contributions to the avant-garde remain largely and sadly under-recognized, especially outside of Europe. *Hell's Angels* was later followed by *Nothing* (1968), a concept film whose title says it all. But, as we all know, nothing is always something, and that something, nothing is undoubtedly a different kind of nothing in 2014 than it was in the late '60s.

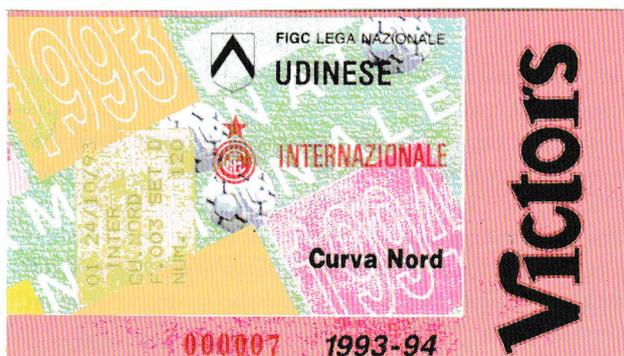
"Angels," this first show in the program, was filled with rarities and, as a result, stirred the excitement of discovery, while simultaneously reinforcing the crucial role festivals ought to play not only in film's ongoing history, but also in its re-interpretation. With William Raban's classic "process film" "2'45" (1973-2014), which *expanded* over the festival's duration as well as existing solely within the screening context (its digital update a total anachronism given the reference to materiality intrinsic in its celluloid specific title); *Weekend*, the ultra-rare 35mm non-visual audio piece by Walter Ruttmann which was commissioned by the Berlin Radio Hour in 1930; Tony Hill's magic lantern-esque performance piece *Point Source* (1973); and Roland Sabatier's 1969 Lettriste film *Entrac'te* (a pun on the 1924 Dadaist classic *Entr'acte* by René Clair and Francis Picabia), which strangely closed the show and therefore became more denouement than *entr'acte*. A work of "flexible duration" as per the catalogue, Sabatier's film consisted of a digital file projection of a static composite image of a hand-drawn frame presumably from the hand of the artist, who explains his *séance cinématographique* in cursive writing. The top left corner has a torn photograph of a burgundy car in mountainous terrain; the illusion is that it's going to careen into nothingness. The shape of the whole is that of a sheet of paper, a *tract*: a leaflet that obviously carries political connotations in France, where demon-

strations never go out of fashion. (Case in point, the recent gathering at République to demonstrate against racism and the mainstream encroachment of the newly elected Front National to the European parliament.)

The two most recent films in "Angels" were Godard's *Changer d'image* (1982), a typical Godardian subversion of a television commission by a mastermind who knows how to say *adieu*, this time in front of a blank screen, and Peter Miller's *Projector Obscura* (2005)—which recalls Hiroshi Sugimoto's eerie photographic series of barren cinemas—with its seven cinema interiors having been photographed with unexposed 35mm film from the projectors in their respective booths. An uncanny interplay emerged between the stark silence of Miller's film and the iconic and sombre voice of Godard in his ongoing and somewhat despairing quest to see the world for what it is. Startling how his line, "There are no images, but there is something between the images," takes on greater resonance in light of his recent 3D experiments, which single-handedly deconstruct and reconfigure cinematic montage.

And herein lies an interesting question. Could the feature-length *Adieu au langage*, in its anti- and re-cinema gestural strokes, fit into Taanila's curatorial exploration of cinema by other means? (Were he not, of course, constrained to the short-film format for Oberhausen—a constraint he rebelled against anyway with some of the performances.) The question comes not only in light of the lingering impact of Godard's latest opus, two weeks after seeing it in Cannes, but also, admittedly, because of the porousness of Taanila's enthusiastically ill-proportioned proposal. An argument could be made for its inclusion because while the nine-show program set out to define different modes of cinematic agency (always in a recurring absence-presence binary befitting the retrospective's





left: *The Thief of Mirrors*
above: *Ticket Content*

title) through expanded cinema, through lectures and performances which included live music, narration, and old-school slide projectors and transparencies (Daniel Barrow, Julien Maire), through revived interventions and risky new commissions, *Memories Can't Wait* was a bit unwieldy. As Serge Daney said in one of his most famous texts, "*Le Travelling de Kapo*," "Form is desire, the background is just the canvas when we are no longer there." To wit, there were wonderful surprises in Taanila's show, some magical moments (like hearing VALIE EXPORT say "apparatus" in the flesh), some amazingly inscrutable and genius inclusions (like Josef Dabernig's "football performance," *Ticket Content*, which I found completely in keeping with his art and films, though it baffled many outright), and perhaps a few too many meta-moments and interventions (from great filmmakers like Morgan Fisher and Michael Snow and cheeky text-based artists YOUNG HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES). When programmed side by side, each became drained of their interventionist power. This indeed was cinema reduction writ large!

Weeks later, I was still pondering some of Taanila's choices, and appreciating the imbalanced nature of the program. The blips and bumps, highs and lows were laced with the curator's pentimenti throughout—curation as investigation and research with risk, as opposed to last year's definitive flatline (*Flatness*, curated by Shama Khanna). And a few symbioses came to mind: Pierre Huyghe called his recent large and impressive mid-career exhibition at Centre Pompidou "a situation." Philo-provocateur Thomas Hirschhorn's astounding show at the Palais de Tokyo, titled "The Eternal Flame," is, in the artist's words, "*une exposition de pensée*," a "non-programmation" consisting of 16,500 off-gassing rubber tires used to create walls for a labyrinthine village with dual campfire hearths for an open

mic in the round, a library, and poet's corner (!), a computer station where one can print out the entirety of Foucault's writings, along with a selection of creepily cute cats. And the ever-popular masking-taped bar with cheap drinks and espresso for all. It amounted to a flood of new situationism, one based on presence and production rather than relational aesthetics. Is this the way back to basics in the world we've created and infinitely multiplied and made more complicated? "The Eternal Flame" attempts, said Hirschhorn "to create a sort of inextinguishable flame by producing combustibles." Taanila's efforts to relay the cinema back to its spectators through various jostling forms of awareness, and to concoct screenings that give us "disturbing, boring, weird, dreamy, perplexing moments" are admirable in themselves.

With two weeks of fresh hindsight and a little rest, Mika Taanila spoke about his curatorial intentions in mounting *Memories Can't Wait—Film without Film* for Oberhausen.

Cinema Scope: Oberhausen has done a tremendous job in carving out a significant niche in the festival world with their in-depth curatorial sidebars. While continuing to focus on their core—short films across genres—they've managed to elude or allay the trappings of the catch-all approach of large festivals by dedicating space and profile to a more comprehensive study of film art. How was this year's program, *Memories Can't Wait—Film without Film*, conceived and initiated?

Mika Taanila: We started talking about the possible programs in May 2013, when I was a guest at the festival, with my short film *Six Day Run* screening in the International Competition. I had made a program called simply "Film without Film" back in 2004 for our Avanto Festival in Helsinki. It was only one 70-minute screening done very quickly, and I felt it would be great to explore the filmless territory more. When the festival director Lars Henrik Gass hired me to do the next theme in June 2013, I was very happy and excited about the luxurious time available.

Scope: With many seminal works born out of a fervency to explore and define (albeit via their transgressions) an "expanded cinema" and revived here after decades, why shy away from this term in regards to this program?

Taanila: Expanded cinema to my ears has strong connotations—the idea of excess and doing something "more." With these programs, I was more interested in the opposite actually. The reduction, the bareness, doing "less." I wanted to expand the notion of cinema, as well, but rather by smaller gestures and many times with conceptual idea-based films—literally works that utilize the idea of abandoning the moving image totally. I guess that to aim for the contemporary expanded cinema, one should've gone in another direction, outside the cinema space, into spectacular, large digital LED screens or something like that. One other reason for not bringing up expanded cinema more than I did was that I didn't want to focus on only one or two specific historical scenes or phases in the history, but rather create a dialogue about how history is influencing many contemporary film artists. However, one can easily see that many of the works were directly coming from the British structuralist filmmaking scene in the '70s, US expanded cinema, or Austrian

actionism. I wanted to shuffle the bag. I was interested whether these specific works still have resonance today, and how they breathe together with the contemporary works.

Scope: In its breadth and scope, the program was hugely ambitious, and also somewhat amorphous. It addressed notions of liveness, of meta-cinema, of performance, of materiality and lack thereof, of cinematic space and spectatorship. Can you discuss what surprised you about bringing these shows to fruition and what you thought worked or did not in hindsight? In the introductory essay, you admit to laying out certain *règles du jeu*, then systematically breaking some of those rules. Can you discuss why this was necessary, and how this shifted the theoretical underpinnings of the program? Or was it a question of logistics?

Taanila: Well, with the so-called rules for my curating here, it was necessary to keep the process condensed. Since I was interested in the notion of limits and minimal means of moving image, I felt it was necessary also to limit myself. Even though finally there were traditional projections in the shows, the only reason to justify them, for me, was that they seriously dealt with the idea of absence. Or nothingness, if you like. Of course, there were many, many risks involved, especially with the live performances. How would they work finally? Not all the works were so super-fantastic in hindsight. But I won't tell you which ones!

Scope: For the first time in more than 30 years, Oberhausen used the historic Kino Europa-Palast as a venue for some of the program. How did this contribute to the thinking about cinematic space, aside from having a gesture directly related to the festival's own history?

Taanila: I think it was actually the first time since 1962...the festival used to have screenings there from 1954-62. I thought it was fascinating that we were able to use the old rundown place. Such a beauty just across the street! It has no infrastructure, no screen, no seats, no booth, no nothing. Just the empty walls and the ghosts of past movies there. So we rented and borrowed everything. In many ways the venue itself worked perfectly as a metaphor for one's own memories, triggering the imagination with the smells and the scratches there on the walls. Additionally, it was also really nice in the way that we could set up some specific performances there, which would not have been possible to do within the tight timeslots of the Lichtburg cinemas, which were of course running films from early morning until late at night every day.

Scope: "Memories Can't Wait" is a great Talking Heads song, which alludes to images in the mind.

Taanila: It's funny, I got loads of questions and comments on so many different things in the programs during the festival, but no one actually asked me about the title! I simply like the melody line of that song. And I thought that would be a great title with the initial subtitle added. But to be honest, English not being my first language, I didn't have a clue what they're singing about there. I googled the lyrics and they seem to describe the public/private thing in a rather hazy, drugged way, but perhaps not too much "off-topic!"

Scope: You've been curating film, in particular experimental film, for some time, but you're primarily known as a filmmaker

and artist. How was this program informed by your formal concerns as a filmmaker?

Taanila: I hope the programs benefitted from my experiences in filmmaking. I can't tell for sure. At least I know some of the practical questions and problems that are involved in filmmaking and production. Maybe this helped me a little bit in thinking for example on budgets, times needed for set-ups, and other limitations on what's realistic to dream of when selecting works.

Scope: Is now a good time to ask: "Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?"

Taanila: It's dust floating in the projection beam. There's this fantastic video installation by Wu Chi-tsung called *Dust* (2006), which features basically nothing but the dust of the room magnified in real time.

Scope: I unfortunately missed the program dedicated to Michael Snow. How is his work emblematic of the theme, say, more so than someone like Anthony McCall?

Taanila: With Michael Snow's *A Casing Shelved* (1970), I was intrigued by his take on mis-remembering. Being unsure of one's own memories, and then he backtracks. Plus it's very much a "film without film." I like McCall's works very much; however, I felt they would've been out of place here. They're more sculptural pieces, where the material quality is huge. The heavy presence. Also there could have been some really beautiful camera-less films, hand-painted stuff and so on. I heard many comments on those kinds of things being missing here. But I felt they were too expressive for this theme.

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