

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

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Film

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## Risk/Reward: International Short Film Festival Oberhausen

by *Almudena Escobar López*

Since its foundation in 1954, the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen has become one of the most established short film festivals in the world. Its famed manifesto, written by several members of the New German Cinema movement in 1962, including Alexander Kluge and Edgar Reitz, set out an agenda for the festival as one devoted to the promotion of artistic freedom and excellence: a festival that is willing to “take any risk” for the sake of new cinema and its future.

The founding democratic idea of Oberhausen—“free from control of commercial partners”—is represented through its horizontal approach to programming, which combines both non-curated and curated programs. Although it might seem a great idea on paper, this approach raises a number of questions about the selection and exhibition of the films that sometimes jeopardize the utopic vision of the festival.

The non-curated segment of the festival is organized by geographical origin and audience, rather than theme or style: an international section, one German and one from the North Rhine-Westphalia region, a children’s program, and two music video sections. Numbered rather than named, the programs assemble animation, narrative, experimental films, and documentaries all together. As a result, the competition sections are eclectic with a constantly changing flow that is conceptually closer to a television line-up than a film festival. Festival director Lars Henrik Gass advocates a process he calls “compiling” over curating, in which multiple heads work together to create an open dialogue between the films. The question then becomes how the circulation of films is structured, who decides what is shown, and in which context and how audiences are constructed. A film selected by a festival is already circulating in the market independently from its inclusion in a determinate program. Hence, the difference between compiling and curating becomes irrelevant. Selecting is always selecting.

By contrast, where Oberhausen is at its strongest is in its curated sections focused on archives (with specially curated sections from the Cinemateca Portuguesa, the Swedish Film Institution, Italy’s Amateur Film Archive, and Gosfilmofond, the Russian state film archive), its “Profile” sections devoted to individual artists, its panel discussions, and its sidebars based upon themes which change every year.

The Profile programs featured sections devoted to more than a half dozen artists, including Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour and Canadian experimental filmmaker Barbara Sternberg. As curator Nat Muller

mentions in her catalog essay, Sansour draws upon Western popular culture reframing the Palestinian experience in an attempt to escape the stereotypical image of the nation's trauma. Deploying an aesthetic that recalls Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns, *Bethlehem Bandolero* (2005) finds Sansour in a sombrero and scarf challenging the Israeli West Bank barrier to a duel. In *Sbara* (2008)—“Arabs” spelled backwards—Sansour uses the clichés of the horror genre to talk about fear, this time using Kubrick's *The Shining* as a reference. In that film, audiences experience fear of the unknown through the hysteria of the female protagonist, Wendy Torrance; in Sansour's case, the fear is directed towards the Other, and materializes through a hysterical Western Islamophobia.

The program also included her sci-fi trilogy, *A Space Exodus* (2009), *Nation Estate* (2012), and *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2016). These films explore the Palestinian limbo state by combining futuristic elements and historical fiction with concealed Palestinian cosmologies. *A Space Exodus* imagines a Palestinian space mission that establishes an independent state on the moon, and *Nation Estate* a dystopian future where all the Palestinian population lives in a luxury skyscraper complex surrounded by a wall, isolated from Jerusalem.



Larissa Sansour's *A Space Exodus*

*In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* goes further by using speculative fiction as a strategy freed from the rhetoric of the real. A “narrative resistance” group fights the state by burying fake handmade ceramics from a fictional civilization in an attempt to rewrite the course of history. Sansour has also expanded the piece with a performance—*Archeology in Absentia* (2016), which was not present at Oberhausen—in which she physically buries porcelain plates with keffiyeh patterns in Israel/Palestine, using fiction in the real world to imagine a futuristic Palestinian past. Sansour's science fiction shares Afrofuturistic questions about the possibility of the dispossessed to imagine a future separated from technocratic constructions.

Barbara Sternberg's sidebar was divided into two programs: one mostly silent and another with sound films. Sternberg's personal cinema has an embodied, textural quality that incorporates classic avant-garde structuralist approaches with an interest in human experience and the everyday. She is particularly interested in repetition and its relationship to human life. Within this context, gestures for Sternberg are especially interesting as basic structures of habit. This is one of the core elements of *At Present* (1990), presented in the first program, a response to Sternberg's male colleagues who were “always making films about their love lives,” as she pointed out during the Q&A. The film interrupts the patriarchal structure of love clearing the path for possibilities outside monogamous heterosexuality. Several male colleagues of Sternberg narrate their personal love stories while a second female voice reads texts about love and morality. The images show men rolling cigarettes in a domestic setting or in a doorway contemplating the landscape, as well as close-up images of woman's hands touching glass and transplanting plants. The everyday and the mundane becomes habit through gesture and similarly love and desire remains structured by the heteronormativity habit. Repetition in Sternberg creates a meditative structure, and opens a space in which to reinterpret perceptual codifications and their gender implications. *At Present*

unfolds a delicate form of feminism based on alternative emotional structures which operate at the microlevel of the gesture, and the intimate movements of the everyday.

Presented in the International Competition section, Nadia Granados and Amber Bemak's *Borderhole* (2016) stated a different form of feminism focused on public image and media. Situated in a fictional border between Colombia and the United States, the film questions the institutional codification of violence and its relationship to the abusive patriarchal perception of female and colonial bodies. *Borderhole* includes images and sounds from the United States' imperialist crusade for democracy and its war on terror: including the meeting from 2005 between George W. Bush and former president of Colombia Álvaro Uribe, and the audio of Judge Jeanine Pirro condemning Islamist terrorism on her Fox News show. These materials are intercut side-by-side with images of the filmmakers wearing transparent stockings and heels, stepping inside trash cans on the beach. Elsewhere, a naked body partially covered with a black trash bag lies lifeless on the sand, dances in an abandoned building, or runs on the shoulder of a road in the rain. These are further edited together with choreographies made by the filmmakers for YouTube, footage of both of them naked digging holes in the forest, or climbing a pile of rocks on the beach and crowning it with a black flag. By establishing a direct contrast between images of violence and media, Granados and Bemak propose a feminist intervention that dislocates the neoliberal rhetoric of the found imagery, repositioning the viewer and its relationship with the female body.



Nadia Granados and Amber Bemak's *Borderhole*.

The use of YouTube and other forms of globalized capitalist media were further explored in this year's theme curated by media scholar Tilman Baumgärtel, "Social Media Before the Internet." The program focused its attention on questions of video activism, collectivity, and networking, envisioning bonds between viewers and emphasizing the importance of DIY media before the internet. Taking 1968 as a point of departure, the program explored video activism from the 1970s, television and satellite projects, as well as open-access channels, piracy, and online networking. Although its exclusive focus on German and American works made its vision somewhat narrow, the program nonetheless featured a number of gems, such as *Television Greetings from West to East* (1986), by Michaela Buescher and Gerd Conrath, in which former GDR citizens residing in the West create sketches in the form of video postcards to their families in the East.

Although vertical in its award structure, Oberhausen maintains the spirit of independence established in its manifesto with its open policy for submissions and the ongoing dialogue it maintains between artists, distributors, academics, curators, and audiences through its post screening discussions, panel discussions, and the Oberhausen Seminar. Now in its fourth edition, the seminar functions as a critical space where critics, filmmakers, and curators use the festival as a text to collectively explore new exhibition and curatorial strategies.

Led by film scholars Michele Pierson and Mike Zyrd, this year's seminar explored the institutional context of film as a medium that links the cinema and the gallery. While in previous years the seminar ended with a public panel discussion, this year's last session took the shape of an internal discussion which ended with

the promise of producing a collective response. Although initially structured around exhibition and curatorial practices, the seminar ended turning its eyes towards the internal economy of the festival and its programming structure. The communal space of the seminar mirrors the collective compiling of the programming committee, functioning as an internal self-critique apparatus within the festival itself. By contrast with the programming, the seminar does not follow the conventions of the industry. Its critical force functions as an open space for artists, academics and programmers to freely discuss the institutional structure of the festival and its economical implications. In other words, the seminar is a space that is truly willing to take risks.

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