

# "Perfect City Telepathy"

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"What kind of influence does the design of an environment have on the psyche and identity of its inhabitants?" asks German filmmaker Isabell Spengler, organizer of "Perfect City Telepathy." As artists increasingly traverse continents and oceans to exhibit and create, what identifying reality do they carry with them, and how do they impart this identity once situated? To settle or work on foreign soil is to assimilate, certainly, yet at the same time the maintenance of what makes the identity compelling—the impetus for embarkation in the first place—must be retained. This and similar issues of cultural translation and language barriers were examined in the one-night Los Angeles Film Forum program of new short films by women filmmakers from Berlin and L.A.

Shot in Los Angeles liquor stores, apartments, and Laundromats, Spengler's 16mm film *Permanent Residents* (2005) follows theatrically attired characters as they perform humdrum tasks like shopping, vacuuming, and washing clothes. The exotic familiarity of the Hollywood landscape, most often witnessed through the media, becomes the only handhold to realness as the actors' clownish costumes come to life, mechanically spinning and behaving decidedly un-garment-like. Spengler's geocentric choice of locations (she's a graduate of Cal Arts), and the familiar ease with which her characters inhabit them, stirs up our idea of a "perfect city," which becomes unrecognizable as to who belongs and who does not.

In Corinna Schnitt's *Living A Beautiful Life* (2003), the deceit is much more interior and beneath the surface. Through interwoven interviews conducted inside a luxurious wood-grained home, we are subjected to the uncomfortably candid admissions of a man and his wife. Fighter pilot, loving father, and connoisseur of romantic indiscretions, the man persists in his happiness, as does the wife with her claims to inner harmony and love, yet their creepy descriptions of commodified pleasure come across as adaptations or excuses that follow the precepts of communication, but tell us very little about the actual situation. Trust us, they seem to say, we're really, really happy.

Alice Könitz seems to sidestep the translation issue entirely. In her *Light Communication* (2004), four actors clad in informal futuristic garb slowly enter a rock-lined pool where a diamond-shaped form hovers on stilts above the water. Producing geometrically shaped mirrors, the characters begin to reflect the afternoon sunlight onto each other, the sculpture, and, blindingly, into the camera itself. As if in conversation, they exchange bursts of intense sensory discourse, which, aside from a muted soundtrack of oscillating string plucks, provide the video's only semblance of "dialogue."

The longest piece of the evening, *The Uninvited* (2005), by Judith Hopf and Katrin Pesch, is also perhaps the most obtuse. As it serially follows a young family, employees of a surveillance firm, and a drunken man through a Berlin cityscape, the 15-minute-long video makes note of timing, recollection, synchronicity, and chance. The overlapping time structures suggest transgressions of the imagination or perhaps memory



lapses, though the boundaries of fantasy's edge remain unclear.

The most humorous of the batch were undeniably Hopf's solo contribution *Hey Produktion* (2002) and *Transformation in the Land of Enchantment* (2003), a Könitz, Schnitt, and Spengler collaboration. While *Produktion* veers from gloating self-examination into a comically awkward dance routine featuring the artist's cheery doppelganger, *Transformation* follows the three women (they star in their own film) on a journey into a backwoods Texas trailer park where they are courted by its seedy denizens. Shot on soundless Super-8, the dialogue has been dubbed in by the artists in a hilarious approximation of down-home dialect.

The ability to communicate as a foreigner or an outsider, while making attempts (whether valid or misinformed) at "fitting in" seems to be what Spengler is getting at with "Perfect City Telepathy." In a time when, as anthropologist Davydd J. Greenwood has noted, we are "making peoples' cultures extensions of the modern mass media," these under-publicized documents reflect a truer (or at least, more personal) state of assimilation and interaction. As a medium, film, much like humor, arguably operates without the constraints of formal language. It in itself is a universal language as such, sort of the Esperanto of media forms, making it an ideal vehicle for the displaced, regardless of their location. The light of the beam is the constant regardless of where it lands.



(TOP) ISABELL SPENGLER, *PERMANENT RESIDENTS*, 2005; FILM STILL. (BOTTOM) JUDITH HOPF AND KATRIN PESCH, *THE UNINVITED*, 2005; FILM STILL. COURTESY THE ARTISTS.