

Thomas Erben Gallery

Christoph Girardet and Matthias Müller

Cut

April 7 - May 7, 2016

Opening reception: Thursday, April 7, 6 - 8:30pm

Thomas Erben Gallery is pleased to present *Cut*, an exhibition of video work by Christoph Girardet and Matthias Müller, who since 1999 have collaborated on over a dozen film projects. For these pieces, Girardet and Müller apply their backgrounds in film history to a research-based process, sourcing clips from a wide variety of films. Through the artists' technically masterful editing, these sequences are woven together and transformed into precise, layered collages in which a range of potential meanings arises.

For the projected video *Cut*, Girardet and Müller combine material from 95 movies that span temporally from 1947 to 2012. The shots depict most frequently incisions, scars, sutures, and blood – bursts of red in an otherwise reduced, predominantly neutral palette. The camera lingers on these sites of bodily damage, but through the artists' sequencing this repulsive imagery becomes beautiful and fascinating. Water dripping in a sink becomes an intravenous drip, which becomes blood running through medical tubing. These formal gestures reoccur throughout the piece, with bodies and objects becoming substitutes for one another, linked by the action they sustain. Throughout, there is an obsessive interest in the physicality of the body, and the effect that awareness of its fragility has on us as viewers. The artists focus on the abjection of the body: the barrier between inside and outside becomes perverted through organic material like blood, hair clippings, and peeled skin – or through penetration, both surgical and sexual.

Wounds may break the body, but they also are a reminder of health, as indicated in time lapses of bruises and burns healing. The action of a cut is then ambivalent, acting both to sever, but also to create a site for future reunion. This dual meaning is mirrored in the work's engagement with film history. Film operates by bringing discrete parts together, both at the level of single stills played back rapidly to produce the illusion of movement – motion pictures – as well as through the editing process. A "cut" is the means by which clips are joined together, and the video is produced entirely through cuts between clips and cuts to black. Girardet and Müller's *Cut* performs an act of both violence and creativity: it repels its viewers with its mangled forms, while at the same time engendering a process of identification between the viewer's body and the filmic body.

Displayed as a counterpoint in the gallery, *Reflex* plays on a small monitor in a continuous loop. In this black and white video, two hands lay palm up as another individual taps the outstretched fingers with a pen. The clinical action resembles a reflex test, as with each tap the finger flexes seemingly automatically. At the same time, superimposed text and a voice each produce a word – sometimes identical, sometimes antonyms. It becomes evident that each finger corresponds to a word, correctly labeled by the overlaid text. When arranged in order, the words produce the statement "one is unaware of the process as it is happening." Derived from theories on language acquisition, the completed sentence suggests that speech is learned through an unconscious process. Language emerges automatically, and is acquired without any realization. And yet, the mismatches reappear in the looped video, and the voice does not learn.

While *Reflex*'s patient fails to change, both *Cut* and *Reflex* function by transformation. *Cut* presents its audience with tragedy and horror, and thus makes its viewers aware of their vulnerability. However, it appears as an integrated element of life's experience, and our identification becomes a reverent and affirming symbol of life. Through the works' shifting associations – images of the body resonate within shots of insects, plants, and landscapes - they function as poetry, bringing together disparate moments into a new cinematic body.



Stills from:
Cut, 2013
HD mp4/DCP, 16:9
color/b&w, sound, 13'
edition of 5 + 2 AP
18,000 €

The body as a wound that never heals.

View online:
<https://vimeo.com/84669748>
password: GMCut2013

Cut

Christoph Girardet & Matthias Müller

HD mp4 / DCP, 16:9, color / b&w, sound, 13', 2013

- Best European Short Film / Nomination for the European Film Awards, Curtas Vila do Conde, 2013
- Nomination for Preis der deutschen Filmkritik / Best German Experimental Film of 2013
- ARTE award, Hamburg International Short Film Festival, 2014
- Recommended, Commission of Film Valuation, 2013

Selected press for *Cut*:

"Like Peter Campus's work, Christoph Girardet and Matthias Müller's film CUT (2013) renders the screen as a skin to be punctured and penetrated, with the cinematic interface acting as a fragile boundary between inside and outside. Through editing found footage with surgical precision, they craft a disturbing montage that exploits our reflexive identification with the figures we follow onscreen (what film theorists have evocatively called 'suture'). Close-ups of wounds, spilled blood and other unsettling tactile images inspire a certain nausea as the film potently cuts through self and other, the 'flesh of the world' and our very own blood and guts."

Jon Davies, Depth of Perception, curatorial essay for Oakville Galleries, January 2014

"Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa's essay film self-portrait (...) JERRY AND ME suggests that all of the world's images are available for each and every individual's subjective filtration and equally valid interpretation: infinity as the pluralistic democracy of access to global mass media. The most minute but to my mind the best example of this at the Viennale is Christoph Girardet and Matthias Müller's short film CUT. A video record of material objects in film related to cinema's fascination with real and illusory lacerations of the body, the film is a pseudo-cyclic free association narrative linking insert shots of actual cuts — arms, knives, piercings, scars, stitches, surgery, flowing blood—the proximate sites and objects 'located' nearby—dripping faucets, torn stockings, sink basins—and similar suggestive entities. The film sources range from the late 1940s to 2010s but are homogenized in aspect ratio cropping and palette choices to nearly unify them as coming from an imaginary mid-70s territory reigned over by Chabrol-Argento genre films. It reveals a trans-filmic obsession with, and secret narrative of, bodily destruction and the myth-like power of isolated objects rendered as talismans, fetishes, and oracles hinting at or revealing the dangers for the flesh that exist across cinema."

Daniel Kasman, The 21st Century Infinite – The Multiplicity of Images,

URL: <http://mubi.com/notebook/posts/viennale-2013-infinity-complex>

"Listen, the wind will whip up, and you will feel the knife cutting into your lower arm. The body as a living organism is used to rejuvenating. Your body, too! There is no wound that never heals. But if you try to imagine a wound like that, a wound never healing, how would it look? On the screen we are dealing now with 95 shots from 95 movies. The whole film is a delicate composition of movements, little twists and turns. Pressing fingers, itchy knees. Rubbing bodies, meat and fat, dandruff and scab. Peeling off tights as the metronome gives you some tender stroke. Hear the crunch of leaves, emerging in one post-traumatic symptom. The guilt and the pain. And cinema. – How would it sound and smell? 'What would happen to that wound while it was carried around by your body? Will it change? Will you change?' So please, keep trusting your body, torn to pieces, hairs stripped off, slashed, infected and burned, purulent discharge and festers. These tiny pieces of skin and blood running down your neck, and knees, the back of your left hand, too. Problems such as alienation, emotional numbness, and also moral pain: the panic and the comfort, the trauma of the body, too. So don't worry. Those who have been through intense trauma may never be biologically the same. The situations we can't control are changing constantly. And look, Girardet & Müller are offering their help..."

Claudia Siefen, URL: <http://blog.desistfilm.com/2013/11/07/panorama-cut-2013-by-christoph-girardet-matthias-muller-eng/>, November 2013

"CUT receives the award for the 'Best European Short Film of 2013' for its virtuosic way of sewing together filmic wounds into a new cinematic body."

Curtas Vila do Conde, explanation of the jury, 2013

CUTTING/TOGETHER: OPERATIONS ON THE BODY OF FILM

Johannes Binotto

... no organ is constant as regards either function or position ... sex organs sprout anywhere ... rectums open, defecate and close ... the entire organism changes color and consistency in split-second adjustments ...

William S. Burroughs: *Naked Lunch*¹

The body becomes palpable in its breakdown. It is felt most clearly when it is pushed to its limits, even past them. Thus a wound is not only a threat to health, but also an assurance of one's own physical state. Herein lies as well the paradoxical logic of slitting oneself, such as youths practice from time to time: The cutting open of the skin, the injury to the body's surface, is experienced as soothing, as a reassuring ascertainment that the body actually possesses substance. But the feeling of snug security arises precisely because the stability of this protective body is being menaced.

VITALLY IMPORTANT WOUNDS

In general terms, the astounding contradiction inherent to the human body is that it needs rips and holes in order to function, requires openings through which it takes in and then excretes nourishment, swallows and spits out information. Seeing, hearing, eating, speaking, sweating, shitting—all these activities occur by means of various fissures in the body, actual wounds which easily become inflamed and sensitized, and are consequently also excitable. Erogenous zones without which one cannot live.

The body of film has a corresponding identity. One cuts it in order to awaken it to life. This dialectic of injury and vitalization is already inherent to film on a fundamental level, inhabits its very guts: The filmstrip itself is perforated so that the sprockets can grip it, picture- and soundtrack are separated from each other, and there are gaps between all the individual images. And the moving sequence of the images, from which the motion

pictures derive their name, only occurs when one scans the film, interrupts it repeatedly, twenty-five times a second. In order that the impression of continuous motion can arise onscreen, the film must run through the apparatus discontinuously, must be stopped and interrupted again and again by the shutter and the jerking cogwheel mechanism of the Maltese cross. Thus the film image only comes to life when it is chopped up by the machine. And this butchery which plays out on the micro-level of the film is perpetuated in the montage of entire films. In addition, the stories narrated by film only achieve their development in that scenes are taken apart and rearranged on the editing table. The scissors are a means of production, Sergei Eisenstein observes.²

In the familiar term of *Zusammenschneiden* ("cutting together"), we find a dense formulation of this contradiction: scissors create connections. Where one cuts, there emerge combinations. The wound creates wonders.

The films of Christoph Girardet and Matthias Müller offer us a demonstration of this paradoxical procedure by taking the corpus of film history—which is already peppered with wounds, incisions, holes, and scars—, dividing it, and cutting it together into films which are simultaneously cruel and loving, brutal and tender in equal measure. The gloomy protagonist of the novel, Victor Frankenstein, had cobbled together his being out of the remains of deceased persons; Girardet and Müller, on the other hand, detach the pieces of their works from still-living film bodies; they must first track down all the fine limbs and organs in these film bodies through meticulous research, then dissect them. A fluttering eyelid here, a trembling hand there, a crackling, a puff, a rustling. From these still twitching and pulsing limbs, they sew together their new, impossible filmic beings, in which the bodies of film history come to lead a fascinating new existence. And the filmmakers themselves are revealed to be surgeons, in resemblance to the doctors from their film *Contre-jour*, with the flickering lighting-control board as a dissecting table.

A NEW FLESH

Especially the film *Cut* appears in this context as the grand manifesto which utilizes on all levels, and thereby reflects upon, Girardet's and Müller's practice of cutting together in a both violent and creative manner. Out of countless shots of beaten, swollen, carved, and stabbed bodies, the filmmakers cut together a new, incalculable body which bleeds and shudders, chatters, drips, sweats and festers, swells and smoulders. "Long Live the New Flesh" is the slogan in the disturbing feature film *Videodrome* by the Canadian director David Cronenberg, whose pictures of bodies flare up in *Cut* as well. Born upon the operating table of Girardet and Müller is a body which has rid itself of all predictability and familiarity, a capricious body shaken by convulsions and shocks—new flesh.

In reference to the painter Francis Bacon, Gilles Deleuze once wrote that in his pictures, the artist transforms the body into a "zone of non-differentiability," where the face is peeled away from the head so that the bare flesh lying beneath becomes visible, revealing the animal in the human being, the act of becoming beneath the covering of being.³ Girardet and Müller go even further. Nothing is foreign to their film bodies, whose limbs are made of both organic and inorganic material, consist of mixed tissue. Already in the first two shots of *Cut*, the X-ray images of the head of little Regan in *The Exorcist* are linked to the tangled branches of a tree. Ants scurrying across the sand look like hairs upon the skin, and vice versa. Fingernail polish is like blood, and blood is only paint. The philosopher Edgar Morin has observed that in the "fluid universe" of film, the human figure possesses a status no higher than that of all the other objects which can be filmed. Whether human countenance or mere thing—the camera turns them both into film images, of which the one is not more alive than the other.⁴ In their film *Manual*, Girardet and Müller juxtapose the images of a hand upon naked skin with images of someone reaching toward soft, silvery plastic. But the cuts occur so quickly that, in the lethargic eyes of the viewer, flesh and plastic become linked, flow into each other, and finally give rise to nausea. In *Cut* as well, the filmmakers constantly juxtapose the bodies of figures with the bodies of things: The clotted blood beneath the skin appears together with the picture of tubing for transfusions in a sickroom; water faucets drip where wounds should be dripping; serum fluid pours over blossoms. At one point, a pillow is sliced open, and one is surprised that no entrails spill out. But to witness how the gray filling oozes forth is at least as disturbing. Even the carpet seems to be bleeding, and when a woman's hand tears her stockings to tatters, it is as if she were peeling off her skin with her fingernails. This is how far the film has brought us: past all the borders of our bodily perception. We see bodies everywhere—in all things.

CINEPHILISM, FETISHISM

Admittedly, this cutting together of disparate elements by Girardet and Müller also always represents a working through of film history. In the "zones of undifferentiability" within their films, a collision of epochs, genres, techniques, and procedures occurs in an unanticipated manner. Thus in *Cut*, the reeds from Kaneto Shindō's *Onibaba*, that wave in the wind, lead to the hair of Nicolas Cage from *Face/Off*, which has just been shorn. Where gasoline is leaking in Hitchcock's *The Birds*, the water in a bathtub is simmering in Dario Argento's *Profondo Rosso*. The films of Müller and Girardet are accordingly always puzzles for the cinephile, who attempts to recognize all of the many excerpts. But they also demonstrate how ambivalent this delight in cinema actually is. For inasmuch as the cinephile becomes enthusiastic about filmic details which allow him to discover

moments of sublime beauty in even the most obscure film, he is in fact dissecting the filmic object of lust. Just as Truffaut, in his film *La nuit américaine*, steals the publicity posters at the cinema as a child, so is the cinephile someone who severs impressions from films and, in this act of love, thereby cuts to pieces and mutilates the very works of art which he supposedly so admires. The cinephile is nothing other than a fetishist who enjoys partial objects: the lips of the crazed nun from Michael Powell's *Black Narcissus*, or the trembling hand with the match in *Fahrenheit 451*, or the sunburned stomach from Fassbinder's *Martha*.

STITCHING

And when a film such as *Cut* withholds from the cinephile many images which he could have expected—the cut-open eye of Buñuel and Dalí, or the murder in the shower from *Psycho*—this is only because the filmmakers know exactly that these iconic images are already present in the heads of their viewers without having to be actually shown. In the black images which repeatedly interrupt the film and thereby appear like expansions of the slits which in any case appear between each film image, even the not-shown images continue to resonate like a phantom pain which causes limbs to be felt long after they have been amputated. Or Girardet and Müller stitch up wounds such as this with visual prostheses which, however, simply make what is missing all the more perceptible, such as the ants in the hand which do not come from *Un Chien Andalou*, but from *Phase IV* by Saul Bass.

This act of sewing, which is shown explicitly in *Cut*, for example when an embroidery is repaired and a surgical operation is carried out, is just as paradoxical as the act of cutting. Just as montage creates interconnections, conversely the stitching together of film excerpts cannot hide the gaps between them, but quite the opposite is the case. It is a characteristic of stitching that it closes a wound, but at the same time the injury is marked and emphasized by this stitching. Wherever a scar is visible, there must have once been a gap. And even the needles, which are supposed to repair the tissue, can only do so by making new holes themselves. Thus the wound is retained in the stitches, while the cut gives rise to coherence. The essence of these cut-together films lies in this paradoxical pulsation of a repeatedly closing and reopening body. And we viewers are sewn and bled within this filmic body.

1 William S. Burroughs: *Naked Lunch*, New York: Grove Press 1984, p. 9

2 Cf. Sergei M. Eisenstein, "Béla vergisst die Schere" (1926), in Helmut H. Diederichs, *Geschichte der Filmtheorie*. Frankfurt am Main 2004, pp. 257–264

3 Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon – Logik der Sensation*, Munich: Walter Fink 1995, pp. 19–22

4 Edgar Morin, *Le Cinéma ou l'homme imaginaire. Essai d'anthropologie*. Paris: Editions de Minuit 1978



Stills from:
Reflex, 2013
b&w video with sound
loop: 1' 50"
edition of 5 + 2 AP
4,000 €

“One is unaware of the process as it is happening.” The ten words of this sentence taken from a theory of the acquisition of language are allocated to the fingers of two hands of a patient here. During a medical stimulus-response-test, a doctor touches these fingertips in different sequences until the patient speaks the sentence in the correct order of words – while text inserts turn the meaning of this sentence into its very opposite.

View online:
<http://vimeo.com/85266909>
password: GMReflex2013



Installation view:
Reflex, 2013
b&w video with sound
loop: 1' 50"
edition 5 + 2 AP

Biographies

Christoph Girardet (born in Langenhagen, Germany, 1966) has been producing film and video installations since 1989. He has participated in group shows at institutions such as Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, and the Hirshhorn Museum Washington. Solo exhibitions of his work have taken place at Kunstverein Hanover, the Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, and the Kunsthalle Bielefeld, among others. Christoph Girardet's work is part of collections such as Centre Pompidou, Paris, Hirshhorn Museum, Washington D.C., EYE Film Institute Nederlands, Amsterdam, Sprengel Museum, Hanover and Goetz Collection, Munich. Girardet has taken part in film festivals worldwide, including the festivals at Cannes, Venice, Berlin, Toronto, Locarno, Oberhausen, and Rotterdam. He lives and works in Hanover, Germany.

Matthias Müller (born in Bielefeld, Germany, 1961) works in film, video, installation and photography. As a curator, Müller has organized numerous avant-garde film events and various touring programs. His work has been featured in various group and solo exhibitions and at major film festivals worldwide. Müller's work is part of collections such as Centre Pompidou, Paris, MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani, Barcelona, EYE Film Institute Nederlands, Amsterdam, Australian Centre For The Moving Image, Melbourne, the collection of Isabelle and Jean-Conrad Lemaître, Paris, and Tate Modern, London. He lives and works in Cologne and Bielefeld, Germany.

Girardet and Müller have been collaborating since their found footage work "Phoenix Tapes" in 1999, which was premiered at the Venice International Film Festival. The artists' work has been honored with major awards and has been exhibited at art institutions worldwide, such as the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Bozar - Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, Tate Modern, London, Deichtorhallen, Hamburg, and EYE Institute, Amsterdam. Their joint projects are held in public collections such as Marta, Herford, Goetz Collection, Munich, Colección Sánchez Ubiría, Madrid, Kunsthalle Bielefeld, (a.o.).