

# CANTRILLS FILMNOTES nos. 73,74



**The Berlin Apartment** – by Corinne and Arthur Cantrill, 120 minutes, 2-screen, 16mm film-performance, 1985-'94



# CANTRILLS FILMNOTES

Numbers 73,74 Double Issue

May, 1994

A review of independent cinema and video edited and published by Arthur and Corinne Cantrill, Box 1295L, G.P.O., Melbourne, Vic. 3001, Australia

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\* pages designed by contributor

**Front & back covers:** from *The Berlin Apartment*, by Arthur and Corinne Cantrill

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*Printed by Impact Printing, Brunswick, Victoria*

The publication of this issue of *Cantrills Filmnotes* was assisted by

**THE AUSTRALIAN FILM COMMISSION.**



Arthur and Corinne Cantrill write on their two-screen, 16mm/Super 8/slides/audiotape film-performance work,

# THE BERLIN APARTMENT

(duration: 2 hours,  
1985-1994)



**I**S 1994 the year when we can say that *The Berlin Apartment* is finally completed in its fourth and definitive version? (The first La Mama presentation was in 1987.)

The work was undertaken in Berlin during the tenure of a D.A.A.D. Artists-in-Berlin award in 1985. We lived there for six months, in a large turn-of-the-century apartment, in the Schöneburg district, which belonged to an academic, away from Berlin, and leased to D.A.A.D.

*(Script extract)*

Winter, Berlin 1985. This is the coldest European winter for 42 years, the last one like this must have been during the war. 1985 is the 40th anniversary of the end of that war. And it's also the 300th anniversary of the birth of Johann Sebastian Bach.

The extreme cold made outdoor film work impossible, unless we waited for several months, so we decided to undertake a project of filming within our Berlin apartment, starting in the dark of winter and continuing through to midsummer. The space of the apartment was magnificent –

large double doors opened up each room into every other. Lines of sight were possible in all directions through the apartment, the light from east and west could reflect through the spaces. Each room had huge windows. The living room had a pair of large facing mirrors which multiplied the spaces of the apartment. From the beginning, the spatial relationships suggested a two-screen work.

The filming was done on Eastmancolor negative – reluctantly – but the darkness of winter made it difficult to consider using reversal. The political isolation of West Berlin at this time restricted choices of film materials and processes.

The filming began quickly to catch the depth of winter light, and while the apartment was at its barest without our imprint on it. The dominant tones of the rooms were creams and browns, and greys outside. We certainly meant to make our imprint on the apartment for the six months we were there with flowers, plants, pictures on the walls and fabrics which we could fold up and bring back to Melbourne.



*(Script extract)*

I wonder about the history of this apartment. Who lived here in 1933, in 1943? Were they just average people who went along with the times and hoped for the best? Or were they Nazi zealots? Either way, there were probably pictures of Hitler on these walls.

If these walls once carried portraits of Hitler, if a ghost of his image still remains here, we challenge it with other icons.

There are times when the spaces of the apartment become the background for our presence in it (three of us, including our adult autistic son, Ivor Cantrill) and our daily activities – filming, drawing, typing, working on the magazine, cooking, tending the indoor garden, entertaining visitors, reading. But the emphasis of the film is on the architectural space, and the quality of the light, patterns of light and shadows, reflections, reflected light, the contrast between daylight and lamp light and textures within, all moving from screen to screen.

We filmed for five months until the time came to pack up and leave.

This description of the film is deceptive. Behind the setting of calm, space and light, was a psychology of disquiet, and a personal trauma which made our stay in Berlin quite terrifying. Ivor suffered a serious breakdown as soon as we arrived in Berlin, and he deteriorated week by week. Nothing helped him. There were daily sudden outbursts of destructiveness, self-mutilation and anti-social behaviours that disrupted





our lives and plans and created anxiety as to how to help our son. We even considered abandoning the D.A.A.D award and returning to Melbourne with Ivor, but we decided against that.

We wanted the film to convey some sense of Ivor's disturbance, but obliquely, as he is often at our screenings. To speak frankly of his problems might bring back the disturbed behaviours, he being someone who is obsessed with the events of the past, especially negative ones. (There was no question of filming or recording the wild destructive outbursts when they happened.)

*(Script extract)*

Between the dissolving tranquillity of this scene has been a night of bizarre madness – one of many – the doorway barricaded against wild rushes of destructiveness. But the mornings are always calm.

So there is this apparent contradiction in the film: there is an appearance of well-ordered calm, but the reality was otherwise. Or is the calm that of the ongoing life of the apartment itself which is other than the lives of the residents who live temporarily in its space? A sense of disturbance could have been suggested in the mode of filming, but we chose not to do this: instead we reaffirmed calm and clarity in the face of madness.

There is an almost decadent pre-occupation with rituals, plants, flowers, mirrors, and it has taken strong determination not to cut this aspect



of the film down, because there *was* an obsession with all this. The obsessive aspect of the film is also a metaphor for entrapment within the apartment, caught in rituals and routines, trying to maintain a sense of order in the face of chaos, hoping for the best . . .

Beyond our personal trauma there was another disturbing element: the strong sense of the NAZI past/presence still in Berlin, which the bleak winter seemed to emphasize. We felt the sense of place, history, the architecture, the monuments, the war damage, the Berlin Wall, the intense animosity between East/West Berlin which was palpable at that time. 1985 was the year of the 40th anniversary of the end of the Second World War with special events planned; it was the year we saw Wundkanal and Unser Nazi.

We felt in Berlin (not in the delightful cultured circles we moved in!) a great bitterness, a lot of resentment in the people in the street, the shops – the people of the middle-aged to older generation – which could be attributed to the experience of the war and its aftermath. There was a sense that very little had been resolved: that people had not moved on through an understanding.

As soon as it was possible to film outside we began working with Super 8 and from this we made the 32 minute film, *Notes on Berlin, the Divided City*. This too is a mainly winter film. Parts of it have been copied onto 16mm for *The Berlin Apartment*, especially its opening sequence. (See stills opposite.)







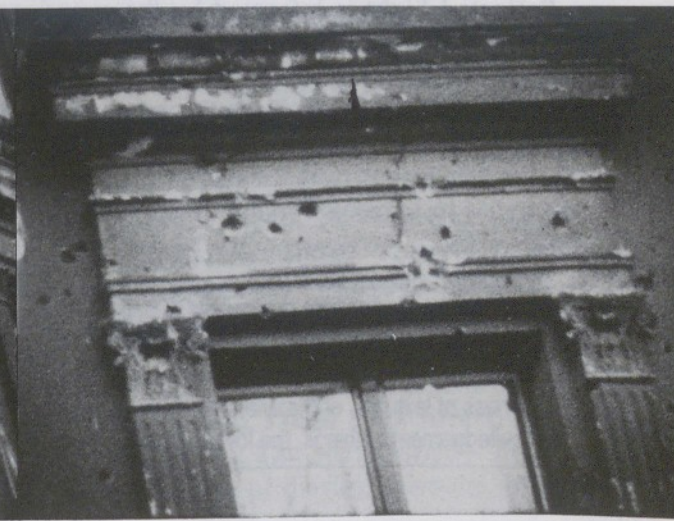
*(Script extract)* One night we were driving through the Tiergarten, and looming out of the mist was the Bismarck monument - a giant fantasy in bronze to Prussian values. At any time from any angle it's awesome, but that first impression - that dark unknown form in the mist was one of menace. There's a shot somewhere here, looking down on the Bismarck monument from the Winged Angel of Victory where a tiny figure runs by in symbolic scale.

One can look to this past for meanings of what happened in our time, but maybe the meanings lie much further back in our fundamental natures, ambivalent, unresolved since our animal beginnings. Berlin focusses the mind on this dilemma.

There's still a strong presence here of the war, the Hitler years and the Nazi era, the reasons for this presence are intangible, indefinable. It's not the Berlin Wall, it's not the

bomb ruins as civic monuments, it's more a secret current of bitterness, of many people still caught in that time, the collective consciousness obsessed with that past but unable to resolve it.

These buildings scarred with bullet holes and shrapnel damage are still unrepaired after 40 years. Is there a message or a meaning in this? But perhaps these bullet holes have no more significance than the patterns made by beetles on the scribbly gum trees in the Australian Bush. Beetles chewing the bark of their host trees, humans attacking their own structures. This is the way we are, this is the way it is. Berlin: it was the heart of National Socialism - the heart and head and brains of it all, where terrible plans were devised and edicts issued. Arriving in Berlin in mid-winter we felt that old Prussian Nazi military nature of the city starkly revealed, without the distractions and embellishments of summer.







*(Script extract)* There was this contradiction between the brilliant light of summer and the darkness clouding the spirit. We could not reach through that black fog. The Berlin Apartment was Ivor's last drawing. It became impossible. We said, 'Let's go swimming.'

Earlier versions of *The Berlin Apartment* were seen as a work in progress, with an unwieldy length. In 1988 we put it aside to develop another film-performance work, *Projected Light*, which is about another living space – our own in Melbourne. (See *Cantrills Filmnotes* #59/60).

*Projected Light* is informed by the experience of filming *The Berlin Apartment*. In turn, its making suggested the ways in which the *Berlin Apartment* dilemmas could be resolved. *Projected Light* was blessed by being filmed on 16mm Kodachrome, and in the presentations of it we project the original film, which is a joy to see. The workprint of *The Berlin Apartment* runs the gamut of colour casts – many of them unattractive – too greenish mainly – confirming our dislike of colour negative.

*(Script extract)* We film little documents of daily life: typing, drinking tea, watering plants, opening the curtains, drawing, and filming this film. We act out little fictions of daily life. we play with our mirror images, our reflections. We explore with gestures, touching as awareness of textures, of materials and objects - the hand, the touch, the noting, the acknowledgement of things, the love of things.



*(Script extract)* The subject of this film is light. By light we know that we live. Everything in the apartment mediates the light, measures the light, is measured by the light, is changed by the light.







(Script extract) How ironic, Michel, that your drawings of this humanity, the poor, anonymous, despised, the faces from the camps, from the ghettos, find themselves here on these walls in Berlin.



Drawings by Michel Nedjar

By 1989 we felt that history had overtaken the film, which now seemed pessimistic and redundant in its tone. It seemed that a great new era was dawning in the old Soviet Union, Europe, Germany, and Berlin itself with the breaking down of the Berlin Wall.

However, wait a bit! It was too much to hope for – the situation turned sour, and deterioration set in on all sides, and continues daily in the old Yugoslavia, in Bosnia now, and where next? The re-unification of Germany hasn't brought much joy to people. *The Berlin Apartment* seems to fit the mood of the times once more.

In the first version of *The Berlin Apartment*, there was already in the narration a concern with the imagined past history of the apartment in the Nazi era, and by extension, with other apartments in Europe where dramas of fear and terror took place. We did not search out the particular history of our apartment – we knew it could have been a place of Nazi fanatics, or of dissidents, or of Jews – whichever, it has been a place of tensions, fear and anguish at some point – the massive bombing alone, all around our apartment block must have been a horrendous nightmare.

Meanwhile, one is informed by reading. Marguerite Duras' *Aurelia Steiner – Paris* was a powerful influence – the apartment as a place of siege. Other reading included Elias Canetti, Primo Levi, Arnold Zable, and Elie Wiesel. One book particularly: *The Lodz Ghetto – Inside a Community Under Siege*, a documentation of diaries, memoirs, official





papers, poems and photographs of the ghetto. Many trapped there were academics, lawyers, doctors, engineers, who were forced to leave apartments (just like the one we were living in) to endure the most wretched conditions of starvation, cold, illness in Lodz until they died or were exterminated in Auschwitz. Among the chroniclers of Lodz was the writer, Oskar Rosenfeld. His account of the eviction of Jews from their apartments in Prague and their deportation to Lodz has an intense, searing quality.

The live narration of *The Berlin Apartment* quotes from Oskar Rosenfeld's writings as well as those of Elias Canetti and other writers. The sound for the work moves between live and recorded narration, music, German radio broadcasts and sound effects.

*(Script extract)*

The apartment, a place to live? a place of separation? a place apart? A place of restriction, confinement, entrapment, of hiding. A place of inaction, of social paralysis. (He felt trapped.)

Countless Europeans in the 1930s were trapped in their apartments – hoping it would be all right – that the social madness would not reach into their lives. They clung to their established patterns in their apartments in the gathering storm.

We, too, living with a personal madness, wait in the hope that it might go away, or get better. We hold to the routines of daily life, trying to find order in the face of an ever increasing disorder.

In the 1930s they should have fled. And perhaps we should have abandoned Berlin and returned to Melbourne, however humiliating and disappointing.

*(See colour stills on front and back covers.)*

### A Short History of Cantrill Film-Performance Works

OUR desire for the theatrical aspect of film presentation goes back to 1969 and the first film events we experimented with at the Australian National University, Canberra, including projections onto burning film screens and onto screens of water, the event for boiling electric jugs and film and the comparison of the film image with a slide image and with the original subject.

These ideas were developed in Melbourne at the Age Gallery with the 1971 *Expanded Cinema* exhibition, with particular emphasis on the nature of the film screen. Films were developed to be projected onto many types of film screens – textured, shaped, rotating, 3-dimensional, layered and a screen transformed during projection. (See *Cantrills Filmnotes*, #1 and 2.)

Later, in America, we expanded our film *Skin of Your Eye* to a complex multi-media work, *Skin of Your Eye (Seen)* (1974-75) of five or six screens, where the film was analysed and compared with the black and white footage from which the film was derived by refilming and colouring, and slides of film frames and film strips taken from the film. (See *Cantrills Filmnotes*, #21 / 22.)

In 1977 we gave our first film-performance work *Edges of Meaning* at La Mama Theatre in Melbourne, with the filmmakers as protagonists in the theatrical action, and using the theatrical space at La Mama to construct a 'set' or 'setting' into which the 2-screen film was projected. *Edges of Meaning* set the pattern for future similar film-performance works at La Mama, which used film, slides, sound on tape, live narration, and stage lighting. The following works were *Fields of Vision*, *Grain of the Voice*, *Passage*, *The Practice of Filmmaking*, *Journey Through a Face*, *The Berlin Apartment* (as work in progress) and *Projected Light*. As these works only exist as live performances, most of which are unlikely to be repeated, it is important to document them; hence this article.





*(Script extract)* I'm filming my shadow on the wall in the late afternoon light. I've tried this several times, but I think this will be the best attempt yet. This will be the last chance. The pattern and colour of the light are changing rapidly each day. In a few days time the late afternoon light will not pass across this wall.



*(Script extract)* There is a dissonance in this film, between what is implied and what is seen. Between real and simulated. Between then and now. Is the film about the past or the present?

□ -39-





**The Berlin Apartment** – by Corinne and Arthur Cantrill, 120 minutes, 2-screen, 16mm film-performance, 1985-'94

