



COMPLICITY IN PLAIN SIGHT

MATHILDA proposes a radical re-examination of Otto Muehl's work through the lens of the film *Back to Fucking Cambridge*, directed by Terese Schulmeister in 1987 and based on a script by Muehl.

While the film has long been regarded as a "satire of the turn-of-the-century cultural scene," MATHILDA offers a counter-reading that treats it as documentary material, thereby stripping it of its artistic and fictional character. For MATHILDA, the film stands as a manifest document: survivors of sexualized violence portray victims of abuse at the hands of an artistic avant-garde.



Video installation on six screens

Voice-over: Zarah Gutsch | Film source: Back to Fucking Cambridge (1987), based on an idea by Otto Muehl, directed by Terese Schulmeister

The installation was presented at the Volkskunde Museum Vienna as part of the symposium *Art Reception – Strategies for Future Exhibiting* in June 2021, accompanied by a curatorial text by Elisabeth Schäfer.

Exhibition Text by Elisabeth Schäfer

Back to Fucking Cambridge was created in 1987 under the direction of Terese Schulmeister and based on a screenplay by Otto Muehl, produced within the Friedrichshof commune. This places the film's production approximately one year after the creation of a painting cycle by Otto Muehl. From this series of nudes, the Leopold Museum in Vienna exhibited only a single painting during its 2010 Otto Muehl exhibition, as the remaining works depict Muehl's abuse victims. These same individuals, who had been portrayed under deeply cynical circumstances just a year earlier, also appear in the film *Back to Fucking Cambridge* — again as victims of abuse.

Among the films produced in the Friedrichshof commune, *Back to Fucking Cambridge* is arguably the most well-known, despite — or perhaps because of — the historical circumstances surrounding its production. The film premiered in 1987 at the Wiener Secession. It was also broadcast on television: first by FSZ on March 31, 1989, then by ORF 2 on December 13, 1993, and twice more as part of the ORF-Kunststücke programming (in 1989 and 1993). Even today, *Back to Fucking Cambridge* continues to be shown in retrospectives, museum contexts, and other venues, often classified as a comedy or satire — as, for instance, during a 2016 screening at the Roter Salon of the Volksbühne in Berlin.

The film is widely interpreted as a vicious satire of Vienna's fin-de-siècle art and intellectual scene, targeting its myths and legendary figures. However, the artist group MATHILDA aims to challenge this common reading. The casting of iconic figures of the 19th century — such as Kubin, Schiele, Freud, Weininger, Wittgenstein, Schönberg, and others — with “artists” from the commune and Viennese Actionism circles raises questions about how the film handles the iconic status of these cultural figures, and why they are invoked and emphasized in the first place. Figures from turn-of-the-century art and culture are portrayed by artists and intellectuals of the commune: Otto Muehl as Sigmund Freud, Nam June Paik as Anton von Webern, Maria Lassnig as Anna O., and Georg Jiri Dokoupil as Egon Schiele, to name a few.

The film's opening scenes show a crowd cheering for the emperor in a summery landscape. What follows are tableau-like scenes of garish excess, especially underscored by the soundtrack filled with screaming (children's) voices. The film appears to present glimpses into the lives and creative phases of the depicted characters — almost like a panopticon, as if the camera and its operators possess an all-seeing gaze. This reflects a core element of life in the commune, where every action was visible, privacy was abolished, and intimacy destroyed. The film's panoptic gaze also echoes Otto Muehl's so-called "action analysis," which he falsely presented as therapeutic (though it was not, and neither was he a therapist).

The intensity of this all-seeing, invasive camera turns the film into a sequence of unfiltered assaults on impulses and emotions, aiming to expose "everything" while simultaneously embedding something central beneath the grotesque comedy: the legitimization of pedosexuality. This is the open secret of the film — much like the purloined letter in Edgar Allan Poe's famous story — hidden in plain sight, where no one thinks to look: in visibility itself.

Otto Muehl positions himself as the "messenger of a truth" that needs no concealment, because visibility itself provides justification. Casting iconic figures of art and culture with equally well-known figures of Actionism works to legitimize pedosexuality through prominence, creating a complicity that still seems to resonate. Furthermore, the real victims of Muehl's abuse — who also had to act out sexual violence on screen — were re-traumatized in the process. This layer of brutal cynicism has largely gone unnamed in the reception of the film.

Exposing this layer is a central goal of the group MATHILDA. Their work is not about answering the question of how to exhibit Otto Muehl's works, but rather about re-examining the film material from the perspective of those who were there — as witnesses, and as holders of knowledge. From this vantage point, the film cannot remain a work of fiction: it has always had a documentary dimension. Abuse victims playing abuse victims, with perpetrators acting alongside them — casting doesn't get more documentary than that.

VIOLENCE OF IMAGES—IMAGES OF VIOLENCE

Curatorial questions (from *cura*, Latin for care) at the heart of this inquiry include: Where in the film does Otto Muehl's totalitarian, abusive, and pedosexual gesture become visible? How can this material be shown without reproducing harm? How can we protect the child actors and abuse victims who appear in the film? In other words, how can something be shown without once again exposing those already harmed or vulnerable?

MATHILDA has isolated and extracted the scenes in which the pedosexual structures are most blatantly visible. These sequences were assigned to individual screens. Each one was preceded by a spoken description of the scene, after which viewers could choose — through an active gesture — to access the actual footage.

In the cited film material, child actors who are still shown without consent and in violation of their personal rights were obscured using a blur effect.

This blurring underlines the dual nature of the material as both fictional and documentary. On the one hand, the blurred scenes can be read by viewers as documentary evidence. On the other, the blur draws attention to the gaze structures of the adult actors. Being able to follow the eye lines of the adults makes it unmistakably clear where they are looking — and who is the focus of their gaze. The answer is: children.

The image sequence on the following pages shows edited stills from the film *Back to Fucking Cambridge* (1987). Directed by Terese Schulmeister. Screenplay by Otto Mühl.

Otto Weininger | Rafael Ortiz
00:03:14 — 00:05:00

A forest. Weininger/Ortiz, around forty years old, walks along a country path. He is wearing a helmet, a corset, and a long cloak—otherwise, he is naked. In his left hand, he holds a book.

Two girls, about twelve years old, laugh. They recognize Weininger/Ortiz and then collapse to the ground.

The book that Weininger/Ortiz is holding was written by himself: “Otto Weininger. Sex and Character.”

Four older women in white nightgowns hide behind trees and then hurl themselves at Weininger/Ortiz. A scuffle ensues. The women strangle him, then cover him with a large sheet of paper.

Two men in suits discover the man lying on the ground and identify him as Weininger. The two girls from before also see Weininger/Ortiz lying there—speechless with shock.

An old woman in mourning attire, a black veil over her face, laughs.



Egon Schiele | Georg Jiri Dokoupil
00:10:29 — 00:12:16

Schiele/Dokoupil, wearing a white coat, is painting a picture.

Three girls, about eight years old, are sitting on a sofa posing as models.

They lean forward more and more, toward the painting, curious about what the artist is creating. But Schiele/Dokoupil doesn't want them to "peek."

The girls laugh—a long time—until their laughter dies away.

Schiele/Dokoupil says, "I painted you quite beautifully," then walks toward the three girls, who begin to scream and raise their hands defensively.

The artist paints a red heart on the forehead of one of the girls.

The girl stands there twisted, looking frightened. She begins to cry bitterly.

Schiele/Dokoupil asks what's wrong and kisses the girl's hand.

Then a security guard wearing a helmet enters the room and asks what's going on.

"Nothing," says the artist, and begins to dance with the girl, rocking her like a baby in his arms.

The guard tries to take Schiele/Dokoupil away.

The girls start screaming; one of them pulls on the guard's arm.



Peter Altenberg | Johannes Gachnang
00:16:06 — 00:17:39

Richard Gerstl and Mathilde Schönberg are standing on a hill, observing the surroundings.

They see Peter Altenberg / Johannes Gachnang, dressed in a brown suit, riding on a cart pulled by a ladder wagon, accompanied by several girls aged roughly five to ten. One of the children carries a whip-like scourge and uses it to drive Altenberg/Gachnang forward.

The group encounters Richard Gerstl. Altenberg/Gachnang suggests that Gerstl paint him with his “sweet little girls,” but Gerstl declines.

Altenberg/Gachnang kneels down to the children and, smiling, explains that Gerstl is more of a “mommy type” and prefers “older ladies.”

A photographer appears and offers to take a picture of Altenberg with the girls. In the process, Altenberg tips over the cart, and the children fall to the ground.

Then Altenberg/Gachnang rides off again with the cart, now carrying the children.

Richard Gerstl comments on Altenberg/Gachnang: “What a perverted pig, honestly!”

The photographer grins and replies: “But a happy one.”



Anton Webern | Nam June Paik
00:23:14 — 00:24:58

Anton Webern/Nam June Paik sits at the piano, which stands in the middle of a pigpen. He wears a traditional costume and hat. While he plays the piano, pigs grunt all around him.

A sixteen-something girl in a dirndl serves him dumplings. Webern/Paik wants to know if he's better than Schoenberg?

The girl reassures him, saying yes, he is better, especially in bed. "I want to be better at music too," says Webern/Paik. "You definitely have bigger balls. And more passion," replies the girl.

Then a dumpling fight begins. Webern/Paik and the girl throw dumplings at each other, rubbing them in their faces. A parallel montage shows shots from the pigpen with wild grunting and roaring.

The dumpling fight gets increasingly wild. Webern/Paik grabs the girl from behind, runs after her, and she yells at him: "Here are your dumplings, and leave me alone."



Oskar Kokoschka | Christian Ludwig Attersee

00:36:13 — 00:38:52

In the studio. Kokoschka/Attersee is painting two girls, about eight and twelve years old. One is sitting slightly elevated on a chair, the other is holding an antler in her hands; both are wearing light-colored clothing.

While painting, Kokoschka/Attersee says: “You can call me Koko. Like coconut. I like that when I’m painting. Or you can also call me Nussi.”

The children call Kokoschka/Attersee Koko and Nussi. “Yesss,” he replies, “just nicely call me Okki. I like that a lot while I’m painting.”

Then more and more childish “swear words” like Luli and Oaschi are added.

Kokoschka’s/Attersee’s mood worsens; he doesn’t like it. “So, so that’s how you speak to such a great artist. You should say: Koki, you are painting such a beautiful picture of us!”

The children correct themselves and say, “You are painting a very beautiful picture of us.”

“Yesss, my best one,” Kokoschka/Attersee answers.

He signs the finished painting with his initials and poses with his two models.

Then Kokoschka/Attersee plays a rocking tune on the piano and sings along. The two girls are beside him, along with three other girls, about eleven years old, who dance and sing along to the music.



Ludwig Wittgenstein | Norman Rosenthal

00:55:47 — 00:57:39

A school classroom.

At the front, Wittgenstein/Rosenthal is lecturing about Shakespeare, swinging his cane through the air as he speaks. He writes: "To be or not to be" on the blackboard.

Suddenly, a boy jumps up and shouts indignantly: "Why Shakespeare?"

Wittgenstein/Rosenthal explains that Shakespeare is the greatest, that there is nothing comparable in the German language.

The boy laughs. The teacher reprimands him, banging his cane wildly.

Then he calls a girl, about fifteen years old, to the front to the blackboard. She writes "To be or not to be" in chalk. Wittgenstein/Rosenthal demands to know what it means. He grabs her by the hair. "Tell me now, what does it mean!" he repeats over and over, his voice growing increasingly shrill.

The girl is very frightened.

Suddenly, now bare-chested, the girl leaps onto Wittgenstein/Rosenthal, grabbing his face as if trying to cover his mouth, forcing him to the ground.

A student screams.

"For you, young child from the countryside, there is no hope," Wittgenstein/Rosenthal yells at him.

Two students scream.

The entire class is now screaming, moving toward the teacher like zombies.

Wittgenstein/Rosenthal stares back at them.

