

It's a Wound-erful Life

LAURENCE A. RICKELS TALKS WITH ROSA VON PRAUNHEIM

Rosa von Praunheim's new movie, *I Am My Own Woman*, made the rounds last year in Europe, showing up in just about every international festival and winning the Rotterdam film critics' award. Scheduled to open officially next month in New York, it's a docudrama about the life of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, whose bio von Praunheim narrates in the following interview. Let me highlight or anticipate two omissions. First off, von Mahlsdorf (born Lothar Berfelde), while still an adolescent son in Nazi Germany, murdered her "militaristic, choleric, insane" father. Second, the antiques she has collected since childhood are from the *Gründerzeit*, the period roughly analogous to the Victorian period. The word itself means "foundation time," and refers to the countdown of the upward mobilization and establishment of the German Reich following unification in 1871.

This life story is another von Praunheim discovery, another forced entry into history's forward march, one that gives pause for lasting documentation and testimony of countless facts or fantasies otherwise scheduled to disappear. Her life is a wound-erful readymade—a distillate of camp—washing up out of the unconscious of German monumentalism. It's an other history or a history of the other that resists the standard forgettogether that today is German history in the making. Charlotte von Mahlsdorf's claim to being her own woman or true to herself addresses and dresses up a unity or unification that still plays a big part in this history-in-progress. It is precisely the past she claims for or as herself that exceeds the whole: it's the near-miss reunification.

Rosa von Praunheim and Sergei Eisenstein were both born in Riga on the same day (but 50 years apart). This bio-rhyme across time zones forces a rereading of both sides of its mix and match (no dialectics, please). But von Praunheim also shares with the subject of *I Am My Own Woman* all the numbers and dotted lines you need to paint "one" self-portrait. Both came



Left to right: Laurence A. Rickels and Rosa von Praunheim, 1993. Photo: William Stern.

out with their own monikers in adolescence: they replaced their first names with feminine ones and their patronymics with place names, and bound together the new names, family-romance style, with the particle of nobility.

In the following interview, held in New York on October 4, 1993, a composite picture of von Praunheim's film oeuvre and the double history it lets roll is sketched out. You two can witness his full output this spring during the major retrospective (cosponsored by the Goethe Institute) that will be traveling to a series of U.S. cities. But in the meantime New Yorkers have access to von Praunheim's films through the Donnell Library, and through First Run Features.

—LR

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Fassbinder and I are both gay, independent filmmakers who worked a great deal with amateurs. But he's very self-pitying in his films. His main message, that life sucks, found sentimental expression in every movie he made. I try to do the opposite, to show people who had a hard time throughout their lives but were able, with courage, optimism, and vitality, to continue the fight for our right to be different or other than the others.



LAURENCE A. RICKELS: Could you fill us in on the history of your new film *I Am My Own Woman*—how you came to make it, and, in particular, the background story of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf's life?

ROSA VON PRAUNHEIM: If there is such a thing as a unique individual, Charlotte von Mahlsdorf is one. That's why it is difficult to lay claim to her as representative of German history (East, West, or reunified). Perhaps she can be compared to Quentin Crisp: a queen, a transvestite, who fought for her identity with a great deal of charm, gentility, courage, and endurance. And it's wonderful to

see Charlotte become a mascot of the gay liberation movement in Germany, especially in West Germany, where envy and intimate intrigue have forever impeded solidarity. In 1992 she even received the Federal Order of Merit Cross in recognition of her art-historical work, and was thus the first transvestite to be honored in this way. Indeed my film, together with the bestseller based on it, made Charlotte into a superstar. The public cannot but recognize Charlotte's immense courage, which allowed her to remain at all times true to herself.

At age 12 Charlotte started collecting furniture and musical instruments. The collection grew into an impressive resource for arts and crafts from the period of German unification, which she has been exhibiting privately since the end of World War II. The collection was first exhibited in the Friedrichsfelde Palace, which she kept from being demolished through her renovations of the largely bombed-out monument. But then one day the authorities gave her three days to clear out. She went back to Mahlsdorf, the suburb of Berlin where she had grown up, and in 1959 she acquired a two-hundred-year-old estate, which she restored completely on her own for the next thirty years while walled inside the GDR, with little or no access to materials or the requisite technology. But she succeeded in renovating the building, which is to this day her private museum. She was always running up against the ignorance of the GDR government and the Stasi, the state security. The authorities couldn't understand her project since they didn't value historical monuments or art history and indeed sold off countless artworks in the West for fast money. At one point she gave away large portions of her collection rather than allow the state to confiscate it for quick sale. It was, she says, her act of "resistance." But there is still enough left there to fill nine rooms.

I rallied to her cause shortly after the opening of the Wall, when the West Berlin senate suddenly got interested in incorporating her collection, which would have demoted her to a subordinate role as an employee of the city government. I wanted to see her continue to run her private museum and to run it as unconventionally as usual. Once the Wall fell, one of the museum's uses under her direction, as a meeting place for gays and lesbians, was put to the test when neo-Nazis disrupted its first spring festival in reunified Berlin. It's been terrible to see that in the East a Germany was all along being conserved unchanged, untouched, since the '30s. You even see the same physiognomies that you associate with types back then.

LR: You have frequently discovered or rediscovered stars; in fact, your films have helped to create several comebacks.

RvP: Yes, I discovered Lotte Huber, who started out as an extra in one of my films and was otherwise doing time in an ad campaign promoting Jägermeister. But in her youth she was a celebrated dancer whose career was interrupted by the Nazi takeover. She had the good fortune to survive her internment in a concentration camp and then to make it from there to Israel, or Palestine, where she was able to dance again in cabaret theaters in Haifa. Although she had returned to Berlin by the '60s, we didn't find each other until 1979, whereupon I made a decade's worth of films with her, and she gained superstardom. It's really gratifying when unusual people, types who are usually only laughed at, looked down on by the middle class, who are funny and unique, can be made accessible to large audiences through a careful, caring mediation, like the one I try to provide through my films. It's important in our sterile society, which stresses only assimilation and adjustment, that as many people as possible witness just how intelligent, special, and inspiring these outsiders are.

LR: A couple of years ago you yourself were the star of



Opposite: Rosa von Praunheim, *Ich bin meine eigene Frau* (I am my own woman), 1992, still from a color film in 35 mm., 91 minutes. Charlotte van Mahlsdorf (Jens Taschner, left). This page, left to right: Charlotte von Mahlsdorf on the set of *Ich bin meine eigene Frau* (I am my own woman). Rosa von Praunheim, *Ich bin meine eigene Frau* (I am my own woman), 1992, still from a color film in 35 mm., 91 minutes. Charlotte van Mahlsdorf (Ichgola Androgyn, right).

looks, back then, like an outing.

RvP: No, I think that this all had to do with this evil article I wrote about my friend and colleague Werner Schroeter, with whom I made some early films. Fassbinder decided to defend him and his films, and took issue with my attack. Fassbinder and I knew each other from the beginning of our careers. I never liked him. No doubt there's a good measure of competitiveness on my part behind this dislike. That which one is most like is what one ends up being most critical of. We're both gay, independent filmmakers who worked a great deal with amateurs. But he's very self-pitying in his films. His main message, that life sucks, found sentimental expression in every movie he made. I try to do the opposite, to show people who had a hard time throughout their lives but were able, with courage, optimism, and vitality, to continue the fight for our right to be different or other than the others. Fassbinder's life, however, is incredibly interesting. He was a tormented being. Of course he was mean-spirited and sadistic toward his coworkers, and they let them-

talk shows and the like on German TV as a result of your sensational outings of public figures in government and show business.

RvP: It kind of made me into the most hated person in Germany, not only in gay circles but also in the hetero scene. For me it was just a cry of despair and frustration in the midst of the AIDS crisis. I'm still convinced that prominent types are duty bound—especially now, during this crisis—to be out there giving all kinds of support to the afflicted rather than leaving it all up to our heterosexual substitute mothers. Of course many people find the outing operation threatening because it forces them to respond, to be responsible. Every closeted homosexual participates in the oppression of gays and lesbians, and every open and out homosexual assists in the struggle for another piece of freedom.

LR: In the index to a new collection of Fassbinder interviews in English translation I found you noted twice, both times in reference to a dispute over what also already

selves be tortured by him. He was the driven, ugly man seeking to build self-esteem through sadomasochism. By comparison I find his films relatively boring because he largely portrayed the kind of middle-class life he himself could never lead.

I need coworkers who are strong and independent, like Lotte Huber or Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, people who have their own force and who can inspire me. I too have been reproached with exploiting my colleagues. Lotte Huber once said that she had been forewarned: "He will squeeze you out like a lemon." But she replied, "I have enough juice; he can go ahead and squeeze all he wants." The people I put the squeeze on are like that. And my talent has been to discover these individuals, to encourage them to present and represent themselves, and make themselves accessible to wider audiences.

LR: When I first saw *Die Bettwurst* at a retrospective of your work in the late '70s in Vienna, I was struck how your work, and not the technically *continued on page 97*

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crashed into the tollbooth and never made it to the opening. In those days drunk-driving wasn't such a major crime, so they let him go home and he came over and saw it another day. I guess he thought I was pretty crazy.

RL: You're a teacher? We were wondering if you believed in art school?

PS: I never deal with that question. I have two classes. I leave for my first class at about the time it begins. I get there and talk-talk. And I walk home for lunch and then back again. I do that twice a week. Sometimes I get up at four in the morning on teaching days and paint for four hours and then walk to school and teach, teach, teach. Then I walk home for lunch. When I get back to school I take a nap. I lay right down on the concrete floor in my office.

RL: I think it's really good to beat the students to falling asleep in class.

PS: I don't do a very good job, but they let me get away with it. I even boast about it. I don't improve the work they're doing; I don't insist they paint; I don't even insist they show up. Sometimes my class is empty, so I just go around and talk to other people. But I'm a very important part of the art department because I'm their oldest person. That's how you get a job; you have to be almost dead.

My sons were going off to colleges (Columbia and MIT were their choices), so I said to myself, You better get a job. I hardly made any money other than from my sales to Mr. Frumkin. So I got this teaching job in Austin. But by the time my sons were finished with school I was used to teaching, so I kept doing it.

RL: Do the students help you keep in touch?

PS: Yes. It's been good for me. Sally feels it was good for me, since when you spend too much time alone you get weird. Before I taught, I stayed in my studio for like six months and didn't talk to anyone but my family. Then I got out one day and the noise of the traffic was too much for me.

RL: Do you see seeds that you planted in the work of younger artists?

PS: I'm careful not to look at that angle. If that were to happen it would be good for me but perhaps lousy for them. But you know, I must say, I was really pleased people saw that "Hand-Painted Pop" show, because I would have thought that would have been the dearest show.

RL: Are you kidding?

CL: Everyone was really waiting for that show to get here. You know it's funny, recently two artists—one of Rhonda's students and another artist who's making a success right now downtown—are using a newer generation of cartoons, like the Flintstones and stuff. One does total sex scenes with Betty and Wilma making out together in this sort of watercolor style.

PS: I'm impressed. I better get right to work. They're gaining on me.

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more polished products that were being promoted in the U.S., was truly new German cinema.

RvP: The so-called new German films that were making it at that time were more conventional in terms of narrative and also more conventionally produced in most cases. *Die Bettwurst*, which I made in 1970, is a comedy in which two very unusual people—my Aunt

Lucie from Poland and a male prostitute from Berlin—imitate an idyllic, middle-class existence, but get everything wrong, of course, and thereby unmask this way of life, which for so many people comes naturally. In the meantime I've made some 50 films. Since 1971, I've been coming frequently to America and have shot many movies here, especially in New York. I'm proud to say that I've helped write New York's underground history. I made a movie called *Underground and Emigrants* about off-off-Broadway theater, another one about the singer Tally Brown, and many others documenting personalities like Jack Smith, Divine, Holly Woodlawn, and Andy Warhol.

Beginning in 1971 with another film of mine that has gained a certain cult status, *It Is Not the Homosexual Who Is Perverse, but the Situation in Which He Lives In*, in which I documented the onset of gay liberation in Berlin, I have been recording gay history both in Berlin and here in the States. And then in the '80s I began making movies about the AIDS crisis, like my 1985 *A Virus Has No Morals*. But I've also made many films that are not predominantly gay, many portraits of women, including *Surviving in New York*, which is my biggest commercial success.

LR: How and when did your interest in documentary work begin?

RvP: I turned to documentary filmmaking in America in 1973, after my feature films turned out to be major failures. We kept it simple; I worked with a friend, did the camera myself, and so I started over. But all my feature films display documentary and biographical influences.

LR: But then what was your original connection to filmmaking?

RvP: I made my first film in 1967, after having trained as a painter, which of course influenced the way I composed my moving pictures and brought a painterly eye into focus through the camera. My background in painting comes to the foreground in my 1984 movie *Horror Vacui*—a neo-Expressionist film crowded with painted sets à la *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*—which won the Los Angeles Film Critics' award the following year. Just the same, painting is too introverted and onesided for me; I prefer film that unites many artists. Installations and performances interest me, and I'd like to do a series of rooms on politics, sex, and death—three themes I would like to complicate and co-implicate through tapes, films, and symbols. But it seems all the arts are in trouble right now because it's such a conservative time. Young people are so conformist. Maybe we'll have to wait until after the next world war.

LR: What about your upcoming projects?

RvP: I'm pursuing many things, but it's too soon to tell if they'll be financed. I have a comedy in mind: *Intelligence Is Edible*. And I just completed a documentary called *My Granny Owns a Nazi Whorehouse*, about a family that for three generations has owned a Berlin house of prostitution, which the Nazis used as a center for espionage. I'm also planning a larger project around the life and work of the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld; right now I'm giving a seminar on him at the Humboldt University in Berlin, and I plan to make a documentary first and then a feature film based on his life. Hirschfeld made many

mistakes, and some of what he did, like measuring gays and lesbians to determine physical differences from straights, was truly ridiculous. But he also founded the world's first gay liberation movement.

LR: As ridiculous as some of his theses were, they keep coming back. Take, for example, the recent claim that there is something bigger or smaller in one's brain that goes with one's sexual preference.

RvP: Fine. We'll see. I like to be surprised.

LR: You're in New York making a new movie?

RvP: Yes, it's a new autobiographical film, *Neurosis*, in which I get shot right at the start and then a sensationalist journalist, a particularly cheap one, begins investigating my life.

LR: Which chapters will you open or close?

RvP: That's not decided yet. The film will still be a while in the making. I plan to include excerpts from previous films and diaries of mine. This spring I published a second set of memoirs, entitled *Fifty Years Perverse*, which picks up where my 1976 *Sex and Career* left off. Autobiographical work is essential for every artist, which is why it's not restricted to any particular time or age. A 15-year-old should write his memoirs and report on how a 15-year-old feels and thinks. You can't do that anymore when you're 90. ...

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his work.) The commodified representations of mythologized histories lack any reference to lived experience and mask the realities of the present, stifling our capacity for renewal. The act of seeing, then, must also be an act of interpretation. If the personal dimension of experience is often at odds with institutionalized norms, *Seeing for Oneself* functions as an exhortation to trust in the "truth" of one's own experience. And if the "body" returns here, it is not as "nature" but as a referent to the conflictual sociopolitical narratives that constitute the real conditions of existence.

Insofar as it represents this inscribed "body," art is another enigma. Institutions may try to penetrate its equivocality, but in Coleman's work, with its puns and eccentricities, distractions and deliberate faux pas, meaning is not to be recovered "at a glance." Nor can the viewer locate the "secret" through an easy identification with some putative point of origin. The duration that Coleman insists on reflects the viewer's work in the real time and space of experience, and ruptures the fundamental illusion of Western painting that Norman Bryson has described as "twin revelations, one in the mind of its creator for whom the image is there fully armed from the beginning, the other mirrored in the mind of the viewer; two epiphanies welded together in a single moment of presence."¹ Moreover, Coleman's shifting viewpoints and multiplying subject positions resist the gaze—the Western transcendent or totalizing vision, the "blind spot" of *La Tache Aveugle*. Like the work of the blind poet Borges, Coleman's plays with words and images allude to the limits of the knowable; they work at the framing edge of the image, where meaning is to be sought not through mediated, inherited structures of knowledge but through the disjunctions and incongruities we discover in our own enunciations. □

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1. Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting*, London: Macmillan Press, 1983, p. 117.