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Ernie Gehr, *Signal—Germany on the Air*, 1982–85, 16 mm, color, sound, 37 minutes.

ERNIE GEHR'S CINEMA GROUNDS ITSELF IN DISJUNCTURE. Best known for his 1970 film, *Serene Velocity*, a convulsive portrait of a hallway lit by citrine fluorescents, Gehr mounts an exploration of the camera as an apparatus, its effects arising through a conjunction of framing and focal length. Seamlessness and suture are here terms of abuse. If cinema has traditionally aspired to a certain invisibility—an eclipse of the machine in a vague shroud of artificial darkness—Gehr's four-decade-long project has been to make the camera and its conventions emphatically, even aggressively, visible.

Showing Tuesday, October 7 at Light Industry are two of Gehr's late films: *Signal—Germany on the Air*, 1982–85, and *Side/Walk/Shuttle*, 1991, both shot on 16 mm. Each centers on a specific site: the first, West Berlin in its halting final decade; the second, the exposed glass elevator of the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco, where Gehr settled after sweating out the 1970s and '80s in New York. For those who know Gehr only for his staccato hallway, the pairing is revelatory, and unlikely to be screened again on film for some time.

Funded by a DAAD grant, Gehr's *Signal* broaches autobiography by way of cityscape. The son of German Jewish émigrés, Gehr might have called Berlin home, had fascism not tragically intervened. The film takes its title from the Wehrmacht propaganda magazine of the same name, its opening shot

backgrounded by a cropped view of the glossy's cover. The explicitness of this reference comes as somewhat of a feint, as Gehr's approach to history is otherwise oblique. *Signal* unfolds in a site of little dramatic consequence: an anonymous intersection, somewhere, we glean from interspersed street signs, on the Rheinstraße. Creamsicle trashcans, touting the slogan "*Berlin... ICH MACHE MIT*" ("Berlin... COUNT ME IN"), locate us in Germany's capital. Yet Gehr withholds further orientation, the intersection's nondescriptness repelling attempts to impute significance. Traffic signs pictographically proclaim "No Entry" or "Stop, Give Way," less directing movement than obstructing it. Affectless and absent remark, this space seems not sited but suspended: an industrialized anywhere.



A clip from [Ernie Gehr's Serene Velocity, 1970](#).

Signal's advance is rigidly stylized, its adoption of structuralist techniques—fixed, frontal framing and the perpendicular, deep-focus long shot—marking it as properly avant-garde. Selected by Gehr's Bolex, space spreads into an all-over plane: One apprehends the images without knowing where, exactly, to look. Cuts are frequent and obtrusive, lending the film a stutterer's cadence. Accumulating yet failing to cohere, their progression hews to a paratactic logic that loosens sequence from causality. Views recur in quick succession with slight differences, whether assayed from a novel vantage or figured elsewhere in time. Gehr couples this montage with segments clipped from a cheap German radio and street sounds that could, plausibly, emanate from inside the film, yet never quite align with what we see. Heels clack, buses stall, and conversations transpire over scenes emptied of all but asphalt and low-rises. The audio's space-agey static and linguistic eclecticism—German touselled with English, Italian, and French—compounds our sense of dislocation. Human presence (in Gehr's filmic universe, always incidental) yields to a concern with place.

Take *Signal's* opening sequence: Gehr trains on an unpeopled curb; four cuts later, the curb returns, attended by a grizzled man in pastel blue. Several cuts intervene before a yellow phone booth appears, which goes on to feature six times in a minute-long stretch, its final cameo all but obscured by a black post. Other objects of Gehr's recursive gaze include a red-awned store, a windowless, white-tiled building, and a shuttered shop beetled by the word REAL in black sans serif. Such iterations produce a dual effect of familiarity and strangeness, furnishing views that are the same, though not quite. Coherent space, that fallacy of continuity editing, crumbles into a slew of dissonant perspectives.

Gehr's banal is marked by a pressure for signification, his everyday all the more evocative for its seeming neutrality. Three minutes in, the camera cuts to a long shot of a tumbledown compound which, a peeling sign proclaims, was once a torture chamber of the Gestapo. Read against this concrete horror, a lone loudspeaker, a lamppost-flanked street, and two signless posts askew in the sand suggest something sinister. Gehr's attention reverts intermittently to the compound, now rendered on a bias, now seen straight on. Static shots flank rapid pans which abstract landscape into blur. Sound, at first continuous with the preceding street view, periodically fades. The past becomes both bracketed and mobile, its matter-of-fact monumentality (the sign's impassive "this happened here") leaching into the present.

Later, in *Signal's* most direct sequence, Gehr layers shots of stilled train cars with a found excerpt from a German-to-English language-learning program. A woman and man exchange phrases of rebuke—"It's all your fault," "You got us into this mess," "Yes, I admit that," "You can't accuse me of that"—as the camera frames an overgrown stretch of rail. Absence is made palpable, history figured as at once irretrievable and open-ended. (Tellingly, though by no pretense of causality, West Germany's historians' controversy, or *Historikerstreit*, erupted just one year after *Signal's* release.) Yet, for all of the rail's muted melancholy, *Signal's* enduring image is that of an analog clock poised atop a graphic of a free-floating eye: a readymade nod, together with the "Real" signage, to Buñuel. Whether advertent or not, there's an element of the surreal to the clock's entropic temporality: 3:45 PM becomes, in the next shot, 3:50 PM; three cuts later, it's 2:55 PM. Time, like space, is troubled, advanced and rewound without motive, or halted by lacuna for which Gehr cannot account.

Side/Walk/Shuttle traffics in dislocation of a different sort. Its conceit is simple and, in a sense, brilliantly obvious: twenty-five takes, each just shy of two minutes, shot at various angles out of the Fairmont Hotel's glass elevator. More than San Francisco's vectored topography, the film's subject is the camera's frame, whose orientation Gehr playfully permutes, turning it upside-down or canting it toward either side. As in *Signal*, Gehr is fascinated by the number of ways in which a site can present itself to his lens, its monocular view proving anything but an analog for everyday vision. Seeing, Gehr's films reveal, is the sum of so many fragments, the camera less a nimble tool than an awkward prosthesis, everywhere announcing its presence.

— *Courtney Fiske*

Signal—Germany on the Air and Side/Walk/Shuttle play at *Light Industry in Brooklyn* on Tuesday, October 8, at 7:30 PM.

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