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"A Look at Hans und Grete "

by Stephen Hilger

Sue de Beer's two-channel video installation, portrays the psychological lives of recent American school shooters. Considering real-life horrific events and their resulting social phenomena, de Beer finds common ground between terror-calculated acts of violence and the morbid, escapist fantasies of the horror genre. In Hans und Grete, fictional acts of terror are presented through the lens of teen-age pop culture obsession. De Beer draws on real life events, for example the 1999 shooting massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, which commanded massive public outcry and media frenzy. Set in a nebulous historical context, de Beer's narrative incorporates the characters of German terrorists active in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As icons of the underground and counter-cultural movements, these historical events and figures often in symbolic form are recycled into popular culture.

Completed in the spring of 2002, Hans und Grete was made during de Beer's tenure as artist in residence at the American Academy in Berlin. As the video's narrative unfolds, two historical moments roughly 30 years apart are examined through de Beer's kaleidoscopic vision. Shifting references to teen culture and cult legends permeate the interlaced narratives of Hans und Grete's four teen-protagonists: Kathleen, Kip, Sean, and Seth. Unfolding through a series of interview-format monologues and through more experiential episodes, the Hans und Grete narrative stems from grotesque incidents of youth violence. De Beer's tale draws on the stories of Fort Gibson's Seth Trickey, Jonesboro's Andrew Golden and Mitchell Johnson, Littleton's Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, Paducah's Michael Carneal, Pearl's Luke Woodham, Santee's 'Andy' Williams, and Springfield's Kip Kinkel. Each of these adolescents was involved in a middle school or high school shooting between 1997 and 2001, a period when more than a dozen such massacres took place in the United States.

"Hans und Grete" were the aliases for Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin, who were lovers and the ringleaders of the Red Army Faction, a West German revolutionary movement. In 1970, Ulrike Meinhof, editor of the leftist German newspaper Konkret, aided Baader's escape from prison, thereby establishing the moniker of the "Baader-Meinhof" gang. As 'Guerilla' terrorists, the Baader-Meinhof group was involved in a chain of violent revolutionary actions worldwide. Coupled with the suspicious alleged suicides of several key gang members, their widespread influence elevated many figures in the group to the status of counter-culture legends. De Beer's video incorporates elements of the Baader-Meinhof story in the tortured psychological dramas of its characters. Media images of Meinhof, alongside rock and goth posters, appear in the work as a visual anthem for the teen characters' fatalistic credos and dark obsessions.

The video brims with allusions to those subcultures in which youth movements are especially fluent: horror movies, video games, psychedelic rock, metal, and goth. De Beer extracts bizarre electronic sound bites from a range of adventure/quest video games including Conker's Bad Fur Day, The Legend of Zelda, and Yoshi's Story. Psychedelic posters produced in the 1960s and 1970s, alongside recent imagery from underground goth and metal scenes, inspire design motifs skillfully compressed into the structure and décor of de Beer's hand-crafted sets. This iconography, combined with elements of German kitsch such as garden gnomes, gaudy stuffed animals, and over-sized, heart-shaped cookies, evokes the hybrid nature of international youth culture.

Hans und Grete's four protagonists live in dual worlds comprised largely of artifice and disparate cultural artifacts. Each of these worlds features a male and a female character; the stories of each pair are cryptically intertwined, relating obliquely and sometimes overtly to their counterparts. Played by a single actor, the male characters Kip and Seth are driven by their ambitions. Kip aspires to power through his school shooting fantasy. Seth dreams of himself as a rock legend; star power is all he wants. Played by a single actress, the female characters, Sean and Kathleen, internalize their emotions, disregarding their futures. Sean is pregnant, though her adolescent bedroom, crammed with stuffed animals, reveals that she is little more than a child herself. Kathleen embodies the imprisoned persona of Ulrike Meinhof, to whom she relates as a lonely and devastated anti-hero.

While each teen features prominently in the video, Kip is the impetus for much of the story's action. Mapping out Kip's bloody fantasies, de Beer examines the fixations that propel teen violence. Early in the video, during a hideous midnight woods scene, Kip mutilates his pet dog, Fluffy, in a ritual of pure pleasure. He pounds, slaps, stabs, and cuts the creature into a bloody mess, though Fluffy is obviously a stuffed animal. Nonetheless, in this scene de Beer alludes to the macabre reality that many school shooters performed bloody rehearsals before their killing sprees, torturing domestic animals as their first kill.

In the first two of three classroom sequences in Hans und Grete, de Beer overlays audio tracks from two classic horror movies: the classroom scenes from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and *Halloween* (1978), respectively. In each scene, a tyrannical teacher instructs on the finer points of reality, mortality, and fate. Both scenes, in the horror films, occur at the moment when the teen heroine glimpses an insane murderer on the loose. Already on a killing spree, the murderer will ultimately be defeated by the heroine. In de Beer's third classroom sequence, Kip uses a crude, unmistakably fake gun to shoot what are visibly dummies. In each instance of Kip's murderous intent, the dubious power he seeks collapses in the fakery of the horror genre.

Motifs from several horror films, particularly *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, appear throughout Hans und Grete. Over the course of de Beer's video, the music, setting (most often adolescents' bedrooms or the woods), the promise of blood and death, coy eroticism, necessary humor, occasional irony, and sheer fakery contribute to an ethos befitting the archetypal horror film. Vivid fields of color further establish a mood of almost formal beauty, contrasting with the video's expressionistic narrative, saturated in the chaos of teen-angst. Devoid of detachment, de Beer effects a direct approach to difficult and often taboo subject matter. The highly structured, multi-part video relies on the monologues of Kathleen, Kip, Sean, and Seth, written by Alissa Bennett. Emphasizing each character's preoccupation with fate, the monologues establish enigmatic links among the four protagonists.

In their monologues, the teenagers reveal their visceral experience of fate as a potent, seemingly physical force.

Addressing existential and metaphysical concerns, their allegorical discourse pertains to invisible connections and scientific systems, to the dichotomy of absence and presence. The sets, constructed by de Beer with purposely false perspective, amplify the story's artifice, compounding the narrative ambiguity of the monologues. Employing filmic distortions such as flipping and mirroring effects, double and split images, and psychedelic abstractions, de Beer concocts a disruptive vision of space. Significantly, the video's installation is grounded in the duality of split, adjoining over-sized screens, which converge at the wide angle of 120 degrees. Projected, the paired image allows de Beer to employ perceptual tricks in which deceptive angles confound the viewer's perception. At some moments, a single image occurs on both screens at once, causing a strange void-like disturbance of the space. The crack between the screens functions as an anomaly, a signifier of the characters' perplexities. Through such devices, de Beer's project transcends time and space, recalling the hallucinatory tradition of Dennis Cooper's novels and the films of David Lynch.

The audience watches Hans und Grete amid the installation's over-sized stuffed animals and shag carpeting. Such an environment reflects the fakery of the video's scenarios while implicating specific historical moments and reinforcing de Beer's spatial preoccupations. The viewer, ensconced in this adolescent boudoir, may enter the picture to occupy the space between the screens and the hybrid, history-laden reality Hans und Grete proposes. --*Stephen Hilger, 2002*