

**Sarah Tremlett (2015):**

Der längste Kuss – The longest Kiss



**Doctors' orders: An Objective Lens, and a poet's sense of hybrid rhythms**

Since the 1950s poet and composer Gerhard Rühm has been working across sound poetry, spoken word, the visual image and music composition, with a particular interest in interrogating the borders between forms. In more recent years he has collaborated with fellow Austrian experimental filmmaker (and performer) Hubert Sielecki. In *The Longest Kiss* (Der Längste Kuss) based on a found newspaper article, they have produced a poetry film based on information about a record attempt for the longest kiss in the world. What is interesting about the article is that the competition was organised by The Association of Pharmacists in order to promote oral hygiene! This inspired Gerhard to create a literary text, but composed as a piece of music in four-four time. In November 2011 Rühm and Monika Lichtenfeld first performed this text with every word recited firstly just once and then gradually increasing until it was repeated seven times.

In Hubert's film he iterates in German all the words himself but in the guise of 4 male and 4 female hospital medical staff who are gradually added to the scenario. Each doctor or nurse recites the text studiously by rote, creating layers of sound as it is repeated dutifully (inflections included) by the 'other' characters. We experience a Surreal yet comically sanitised, choral drama, where individuality has become unimportant in harnessing and repeating the statistical information. Within a fixed frame the viewer becomes entranced by shifting surface patterning as more entities enter the arena: we become aware of random, flapping hand gestures, and forward bobbing motions; the startlingly visceral shapes of hospital instruments, accompanied by patterns of sound (if you don't speak German) which become hypnotic in their didactic unfolding.



Gerhard Rühm

Sielecki told me with regard to Rühm's work: 'I try to keep the poet's text pure – as a statement he himself made. I do not try to intertwine my feelings with the text and its deeper meaning. That is for the poet to show and let the viewer find his own interpretation. My work is to illustrate in a subtle or humorous way the words the author has found ... I try not to bring any deep meaning of my own into the work of others ... other than using technology to reflect the state of society (the aim of any artist and/or filmmaker).'

In a sense such objectivity invites us to look through the lens as a laboratory technician. We monitor Hubert's meticulous movements as he presents a compelling symphony of clinical guises. Here the recited information anaesthetises the romance of the kiss, yet also draws us into a sense of the absurdity of the subject. Though we watch, we laugh, because we also want to shout: this is the wrong question, it is not the *longest* kiss but the most deeply felt and desired that we want to (but can never) measure. Does the most ardent love live in the biggest house? How can the all-consuming aura of a first kiss be harnessed to computer data, and national pride. On another level we could say that here we are witnessing the playing out of the absurdity of the inherited Cartesian dichotomies within Western philosophy: the hierarchies of intellect over emotion, reason over instinct and word over matter.

This also true of another of their films – *Joke* – (Witz) ([youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)), also relating to the medical profession, where, interestingly, Rühm determined the camera angles and editing criteria. The film, in black and white, begins by explaining that a woman feels sick; she must see a doctor. The camera (here the viewer aligns with the doctor's eye) roves slowly and steadily across her clothed body, as she undoes garments to reveal single words written on her skin in strategic areas e.g. *Ich* (I) above her belly button. The words gradually form the sentence 'Dr I feel sick but all they (you) want is to have a good time'. We realise that, in being asked to undress for the doctor she has been compromised by his (and more insidiously *our*) power. Here it is clear that the relationship between ink and skin, declares not only a hierarchy of word over matter but much darker political and philosophical issues. Obeying the voice of authority, the rights of the individual can be akin to impotence. This role is particularly relevant to women and, in its most horrific form, reminds me of American artist Jenny Holzer's *Lustmord Project* (first presented in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Magazin in November 1993) where descriptions voiced by the attackers

or victims of rape in war zones are presented as short, written accounts in ink or ink and blood on skin.

The conflict between reason and emotion underpinning *The Longest Kiss* has created a scored, realist 'musical painting as poetry film', with intertwined historical contexts descending from art, poetry and music. Here the 'performance' is not only through human characterisation and the visual conflict (or humour) between uniform, emotional body language and studied recitation of an absurd event, but the perception of patterned shapes and sounds in tension and equivalence as we behold the fixed frame moving surface of the screen. The visual rhythms created by Hubert's characters in combination with an almost metronomic, recited dialogue creates a hybrid visual/aural prosody from two conflicting principles (the ancient sign of a poet at work) as surely as linear verse, with or without a metrical 'beat', and cyclical turning create the poem on the printed page.

Sarah: January 2015

As it is impossible to provide subtitles in other languages the following English introduction acts as a brief explanation of the subject matter.

### **THE LONGEST KISS**

The longest kiss in the world continued for 30 hours, 59 minutes and 27 seconds. Clara and Hannes who kissed each other for the first time on November 21, 1986 are determined to break this world record on Valentine's Day, February 4. The world record attempt will be organised by the Association of Pharmacists. The pharmacists want to promote superior oral hygiene. They refer to the fact that during a normal kiss 40,000 parasites are transmitted, besides nine milligrams of water, some fat, proteins, salt and also 250 species of bacteria. The Association of Pharmacists chose Clara and Hannes because at the age of respectively 38 and 41 years they would be experienced. During the world record attempt they are neither allowed to lie down nor sit and may not visit the toilet.