Still Moving: Points of Departure

‘Still Moving’ brings together photographs, films, and archival materials from the remarkable artistic cosmos of Ulrike Ottinger. The works presented here, though many and varied, and spanning the period 1975 to 2016, constitute but a small fraction of Ottinger’s larger oeuvre. The exhibition is perhaps best thought of as a microcosm of her ongoing body of work. That work is a provocative, exploratory corpus that defies any easy framing or classification, and which ranges from epic ethnographic documentaries (some up to ten or twelve hours long) to radio plays, theatre and opera productions, from artist’s books to feature films and elaborate multi-media installations.\(^1\)

Ottinger’s artistic trajectory began in her hometown of Konstanz, Germany, where she opened her own studio and exhibition space as a teenager in 1958. It continued through studies in Munich, but first took flight in Paris, where she lived from 1962 to 1968. Here she studied etching techniques with renowned printmaker Johnny Friedlaender and attended the lectures of figures such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Louis Althusser and Pierre Bourdieu at the Sorbonne. In Paris, Ottinger used photography to underpin the colourful, witty paintings and tableau-objects she made during this period – works that applied the techniques of Pop and the Parisian ‘figuration narrative’ or ‘peinture nouvelle’ movement to portray the intersections of mass media and everyday life.\(^2\) Departing from both Paris and from painting, Ottinger returned to Konstanz and founded the film club visuell in 1969, as well as the Galerie im Salzbüchsle (which became ‘galeriepress’ in 1970 with Ottinger focusing on publishing artists’ editions and multiples). The gallery exhibited artists including Lourdes Castro, David Hockney, Allan Kaprow, Eduardo Paolozzi, Joe Tilson and Wolf Vostell (among others), and participated in the first Art Basel fair in 1970. Her prolific work in film commenced in Konstanz and continued after her move to Berlin (where she is still based), in 1973. Her filmography now extends to some twenty five films, most of which are complex, feature-length works. This exhibition opens whilst Ottinger is at work on a new film project that has taken her back to Paris.

As this brief curriculum vitae implies, Ottinger’s life has been devoted to art, and to the exploration of what images can do, of what they can become, of how they are shared. To that end, still and moving images abound in her art. Moreover, her work often draws on the vast extensive personal archive of historical objects and images accumulated through her lifetime. The title ‘Still Moving’ points to an equally significant aspect of her practice, for in her hands photographs and films do not just proliferate and become abundant, they also play out a multiplication or expansion of the ways in which images (still and moving) relate to each other, and to the personal and cultural archives from which they emerge and into which they enter. As Katharina Sykora insightfully notes, this transformed relatedness pressures the very designation of Ottinger’s image collections as an ‘archive’. They might rather be termed a ‘hoard’ or a ‘cornucopia,’ insofar as they are not assembled or reassembled according to the application of an external schema or hierarchy, but function instead as ‘active participants’ in the context of a life ‘guided by conscious aesthetic principles.’\(^3\)

We can trace this active role of images throughout the artist’s working practices. Ottinger’s films often begin with the production of scripts that take the form of artist’s books. Into these books drawings, clippings, and all kinds of photographic images are collaged and annotated: examples of these books (and digital versions of them) are included in ‘Still Moving’. Photographs constitute an important form of pre-production for Ottinger’s films, and those films often incorporate still images; conversely her photographs sometimes adopt the style of the ‘film still’ genre. Moreover, still photographs become mobile in Ottinger’s use of them in installation. An artist for whom the exhibition itself is a medium, she is adept at finding new combinations, sequences, and encounters amongst her works, as she has done for The Hunterian. ‘It is the event of appearance, of showing and seeing, which is at the core of their being,’ Sykora writes of Ottinger’s photographs, ‘they vibrate sympathetically as pre- and post-images in every new performance and bring forth an overlapping of superimpositions that grow constantly denser.’\(^4\) If they are themselves performers of sorts, the photographs also attest to the cultural performances that attend their production: the presentation of the subject’s self to the camera, the artist’s
The inclusion of the ‘colonial’ sequences within Dorian Gray (and among the photographs that accompany it) is a significant one. Though Ottinger is an intrepid and frequent traveller, and though much of her work is predicated on expeditions to locations in Asia, the South Seas, or among Europe’s peripheries, she is always mindful of the footsteps such journeys are following in. Consequently, colonial projects of mastery and their reliance on fantasized forms of ‘otherness’ are figured and contested in the work. One key strategy for this contestation is Ottinger’s characteristic merging or melding of documentary modes with mythic or fantastical ones. Here Western projections are pushed to a point of excess, and the documentary image’s capacity to narrate or represent its subjects in absentia is undone. We see this at work in the 1989 film Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia (the first feature to be shot by a woman in Mongolia) and in its photographic analogues, some of which are shown in ‘Still Moving’. Here we follow a group of Westerners—including Delphine Seyrig, in her final film role—on the Trans-Siberian railway as they dine, converse and perform songs to entertain each other on the journey. This miscellaneous, theatrical group are taken hostage by the fierce Mongolian princess Ulan Iga (Xu Re Huar), and spend a summer as captives in her nomadic tent village, where they learn rituals of hospitality and kinship. The film and the photographs alike bring together two seemingly opposed orders of representation, the fictive performance and the ethnographic document.

Ottinger would venture to Outer Mongolia for 1991’s 501-minute documentary TAIGA (also represented photographically in ‘Still Moving’). The durational character of films such as TAIGA, or the recent, twelve-hour Chamisso’s Shadow (2016), point to something fundamental in Ottinger’s attitude to encountering cultures such as those she filmed in Mongolia. ‘Ulrike Ottinger sympathizes with
all things foreign,’ Eva Meyer has written, ‘because they take her beyond the
boundaries of recognition – this makes her films the medium of a cognition that
involves imagination and registration, critique and concern.’

The sense that encounters with other times, places, subjects cannot be reduced to
clichés or formulae, that they are not in the end assimilable to well-worn narratives, that
they are yet-to-come as well as historically overdetermined, is vital to Ottinger’s
practice. ‘It is always the first time,’ the script of Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia tells
us, and Ottinger’s work is indeed ‘beyond recognition’ in this sense. Her work
might be seen as a model of the ‘queer vibrancy’ and wildness theorized by J.
Jack Halberstam in a recent essay. Citing anthropologist Michael Taussig,
Halberstam writes that “wildness is this “spirit of the unknown and the
disorderly,” and it is not a spirit that “belongs” to indigenous contexts and gets
stolen by others for other purposes; rather … it describes the space and the
modes of knowing and unknowing that emerge in the encounter between
capital and chaos, privilege and struggle, myth and countermyth.”

Such are the encounters Ottinger’s work begins with and which it communicates.

While Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia and other of Ottinger’s feature films will be
shown in a programme of cinema screenings, three shorter moving image works
are included in the exhibition itself. Their respective contexts of production set
out some of Ottinger’s affinities with other avant-gardist filmmakers. Superbia –
The Pride (1986) was commissioned by ZDF, and distributed by the feminist
social enterprise Women Make Movies, for Seven Deadly Sins, a project that
included notable peers such as Chantal Akerman, Valie Export, and Helke
Sander. The film presents the sin of pride through an extravagant allegorical
procession, pointedly intercut with documentary images of marches, ticker-tape
parades and military reviews. Still Moving (2009) was made for a celebration of
the work of American queer cinema pioneer Jack Smith, and uses music, dance
and a collage of disparate material to meditate on how objects are brought to
life. Aloha (2016), meanwhile, reflects an earlier history of cinema, paying
homage to F.W. Murnau and his final film Tabu (1931), for which he collaborated
with Robert Flaherty, famous for his ‘narrative documentary’ approach. In Aloha,
Ottinger combines Murnau’s footage of the South Seas (including outtakes)
with sequences from her own earlier work, including the 16mm films
Enchantment of the Blue Sailors (1975) and Madame X—An Absolute Ruler (1977).
Here again we see Ottinger’s capacity for putting still and moving images into
new relations or constellations.

The film Still Moving assembles and reanimates sculptural objects Ottinger
inherited from her father’s Africanist collection, juxtaposing them with items of
her own, including photographs from the 1970s, and ends with a rediscovered
fragment of a Super-8 film taken at the 80th birthday party of Lil Picard, a
performance artist, and critic, a friend of the Dadaists and frequenter of
Warhol’s Factory. Of this heterogenous assembly of people, pictures and things,
Ulrike Ottinger has stated: ‘My archive of objects is equal to the no less real
archive of my memory. They animate each other and bring forth ever new and
unexpected images and ideas. It is as if one were watching, as it takes shape, the
play of thinking with its infinite interconnections.”

Her work is still moving in every sense.

Dominic Paterson (Curator of Contemporary Art, The Hunterian)

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1 Ottinger’s work with exhibition design and installation is carefully documented in Veit
Görner and Antonia Lotz (eds) Ulrike Ottinger: Weltbilder, Nürnberg: Verlag für modern
2 This period of Ottinger’s life and work is detailed by Hanne Bergius in the essays ‘New
Horizons: Ulrike Ottinger in Paris’ and ‘Ulrike Ottinger’s Peinture Nouvelle: Decoding the
Myths of Everyday Life,’ both in Ulrike Ottinger: Paris Pop, Berlin: Neuer Berliner
Kunstverein, 2011.
4 Ibid.