

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 Salzbüchle (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

performance of the role of the photographer. All kinds of action are implicit in Ottinger's 'stills,' whether that takes the form of the gestures of everyday life, of more intense and more extreme rituals of power and its techniques, of tableau-like demonstrations of high drama or emotion, or of intense moments of encounter between cultures. Not least, the work invites us to think differently about how images may oscillate between reality and the imagination, or move between the singularity of one artistic vision and the cross-cultural image archives through which that vision is articulated.

The groups of photographs exhibited in 'Still Moving' are associated with a particular constellation of films. The majority were made alongside the so-called 'Berlin Trilogy' of *Ticket of No Return* (1979), *Freak Orlando* (1981) and *Dorian Gray in the Mirror of the Yellow Press* (1984). The first of these, which alludes to Ottinger's own 'one-way' departure to Berlin, presents one woman's journey through the city – and via alcohol – to the point of destruction. With its stunning costumes, a carefully constructed colour palette, and its vivid use of Berlin as a backdrop, the film combines visual brilliance with a sharply satirical script. Its cast includes Ottinger's frequent collaborator Tabea Blumenschein who is the subject, for instance, of those photo sequences depicting elegantly wasted telephone calls or wilder moments of drunken discomposure. With Virginia Woolf's gender-troubling, time-travelling *Orlando* (1928) as one of its protagonists, *Freak Orlando* makes modern Berlin into the setting for 'a history of the world from its beginnings to our day.' This history is shown to be marked by violence, oppression and cruelty, as in Ottinger's extraordinary images of historical junctures such as the Spanish Inquisition, which she relays via Goya's lacerating, unforgettable depictions of torture. Though dystopian, the unsettling visions that make up the world of *Freak Orlando* allow marginalised bodies to take centre stage in a reimagining of aesthetic and social norms that suggests the existence of alternate, more heterodox or heterotopic realities. Like *Freak Orlando*, the third of the 'Berlin Trilogy' references iconic modern works. Here the points of departure are Oscar Wilde's ageless libertine hero Dorian Gray, and the demonic anti-hero Dr Mabuse (protagonist of three films made by Fritz Lang from the 1920s to the 1960s). Ottinger reworks these characters in significant

ways, with Dorian portrayed androgynously by actress, model and artist Veruschka von Lehnendorff, and Mabuse played by Delphine Seyrig as a media mogul set on world domination. This narrative is inter-cut with opera scenes relating the Spanish conquest of the Canary Islands, and creating a parallel account of power and appropriation.

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.'⁵ 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.'⁶ 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.'⁷ Her work is still moving in every sense.

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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 Kunst Nürnberg, 2013.

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.

³ Katharina Sykora, 'A Photographic Hoard' in Ursula Blickle, Catherine David, Gerald Matt (eds) *Ulrike Ottinger: Image Archive*, Nürnberg: Verlag für modern Kunst Nürnberg, 2005, p. 289.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Eva Meyer, 'Ulrike Ottinger's Chronicle of Time,' *Afterall*, No. 16, 2007, p. 39.

⁶ J. Jack Halberstam, 'Wildness, Loss, Death,' *Social Text*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Winter 2014), p. 147.

⁷ <http://www.ulrikeottinger.com/index.php/still-moving.677.html>