

In Present Tense Films of Ute Aurand

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presented in collaboration with the Pacific Film Archive
Ute Aurand In Person

Over the last thirty years, German filmmaker Ute Aurand has been creating films drawn from her daily life, travels and friends. Made in conversation with the work of Jonas Mekas, Margaret Tait and Marie Menken, Aurand's films find a spontaneous interaction with the here and now. Her signature staccato bursts of imagery share a stylistic affinity with Mekas, but lack the Lithuanian émigré's melancholy. Instead, her work has a decidedly joyous present tense—the flooding imagery of the now. (Chris Kennedy)

Schweigend ins Gespräch vertieft (Deeply Absorbed in Silent Conversation) (1980) by Ute Aurand; 16mm, color, silent, 8 minutes, print from the maker

Terzen Teil I (Thirds Part 1) (1998-2006) by Ute Aurand; 16mm, color, sound, 20 minutes, print from the maker

In die Erde gebaut (Building Underground) (2008) by Ute Aurand; 16mm, color, sound, 42 minutes, print from the maker

“Improvisation is, I repeat, the highest form of concentration, of awareness, of intuitive knowledge—when the imagination begins to dismiss the prearranged, the contrived mental structures and goes directly to the depths of the matter. This is the true meaning of improvisation and it is not a method at all. It is rather a state of being necessary for any inspired creation. It is an ability that every true artist develops by a constant and life long inner vigilance, by the cultivation, yes, of these senses.” (Jonas Mekas)

These words, spoken at the beginning of Ute Aurand and Ulrike Pfeiffer's *OH! die 4 Jahreszeiten (OH! The 4 Seasons)*, 1988), in which the two filmmakers cavort through the four seasons in Berlin, Moscow, Paris and London, sets up the film into a joyously celebratory adventure. Pfeiffer runs around in the snow in a white dress and boots, Aurand swings a young boy around and around in Red Square, Pfeiffer submerges herself in a Paris fountain and the two of them dress up as angels for a night on the town in London. The camera, traded between the two filmmakers, follows the other filmmaker closely and the music of Orff, Prokofiev, Piaf and Deller add to the exuberance and spontaneity of the moment.

This early film, amplified by the quotation by Mekas, gives context to Ute Aurand's filmmaking practice, exemplary in the three films represented tonight. Throughout her oeuvre, which draws deeply from her daily life, travels and friends, Aurand's films find a spontaneous interaction with the here and now. Her filmmaking has a constant, improvisatory engagement with the profilmic events before her camera and pulls its energy from a rapid-fire shooting scheme. In fact, her signature staccato bursts of imagery share a stylistic affinity with Mekas' own filmmaking. Like his work, her films are comprised of short phrases of imagery that build up into a larger whole. However, Mekas' film work has a melancholic tone—his image bursts represent the attempts of the Lithuanian refugee to hold onto the fleeting moments of life that pass before his camera. Aurand's films instead carry forth a decidedly joyous present tense—the flooding imagery of the now.

Aurand's first film, *Schweigend ins Gespräch vertieft (Deeply Absorbed in Silent Conversation)*, establishes the intimacy of her style even as it creates a quiet interiority that disappears from her more celebratory later work. From its opening title, a reverse title card that flips to the correct reading, the film is about mirrors and reflections. The central character walks out of her front door and looks down at her reflection in a puddle on the street. Her subjectivity is constantly revealed in her surroundings. Her cast

shadow and reflection appear along the cobblestones, on the hood of a car, in mirrors, in mylar that is ripped apart and a puddle that drains before our eyes. In this remarkably direct film, she permutes a series of possible reflective moments, attempting to see herself more clearly as she reveals herself to us.

The remarkable central scene, shot in a swimming pool, locates the double physically in the body of another. A nude swimmer, who initially swims just below the surface of the water—finding her reflection above rather than below—is joined by another swimmer who replaces that reflection with her own body. The aching distance of the mirror is replaced by the physical caress of proximity, beautifully aided by a tactile underwater choreography. Surface of water becomes surface of skin.

After than brief moment of reverie, we return to the single subject, again alone in silent thought. The image is revealed to be a reflection in a train window, darkened by a tunnel, which gives way to the rushing scenery outside. In the film's final action, the woman stands up and opens the window, looking beyond her reflection at the city passing by. This act announces a recognition of the world beyond the self. In effect, it is a launching point for the artist herself. The young woman absorbing the view passing speedily by the window foreshadows the restless eye of engagement that will so actively mark Aurand's evolving visual style.

Terzen Teil I (Thirds Part 1) is a re-edit of an earlier fifty-minute version that accumulates diary films of her travels from 1992–1998. One of her trips during that time was to the Scottish island of Orkney to visit Margaret Tait, a filmmaker and poet who, like Mekas, has been an important inspiration for Aurand. Tate's films are also representations of a deeply personal attention to one's surroundings, in her case her island community, which she filmed lovingly over the course of fifty years before she died at age eighty in 1998.

Inspired in part by that trip, *Terzen* is a film of portraiture, capturing friends and family with an energetic cubism. These are brief encounters, but they have an intense sense of place and time, as Aurand attempts to provide us multiple angles on a person (amplifying this occasionally through superimposition) to give us a sense of personality and subject through a condensed representation. Despite the rapidity of Aurand's light and energetic camera, there is a recognizable central character around which the camera pivots. Robert Beavers made a similar observation in a letter to Aurand:

Early in the film I recall a chair held in the strong afternoon sunlight. Even though you show it from many angles, it has a potent stillness. This strikes me as a good example of how you embody an active sense of seeing in your filming, and you reflect back to us the paradox that it is in movement that we create stillness. The eye, constantly moving yet creating stillness.¹

Perhaps that stillness is a pure form of the *now* as a moment that separates itself so briefly from past and future. In that sense, the staccato shots of this film act as momentary breaks in time, monads briefly isolated from time through the flash frames that bracket them—the closest one can get in film to a snapshot. That many of her subjects in *Terzen* are children not only adds to the playfulness of this film, but it also isolates the moment in our lives where we had the least sense of time passing—the greatest sense of now.

The final scene of the long version provides a brief return to the thematics of her first film, as she points her camera at her own shadow on the wall in her kitchen. Less serious with time, Aurand imbues this with a playful presence, dancing to a French pop song while drying dishes at her sink. This self-portrait finds her, at the end of her travels, back at home with the memories she shared to us as images. This little dance of light and of memory—a final portrait to end the film.

With *In die Erde gebaut (Building Underground)*, Aurand creates a film that beautifully melds her seeing with her subject. She follows the construction of the new wing of Zurich's Museum Reitberg from the groundbreaking in 2004 to its opening in 2007. Her unparalleled access to the construction site provides an attentive eye towards the meticulous labour involved. Remarkably, her staccato style creates a formal echo with the construction we see taking place. Her quick shots refer back to the basic construction of filmmaking—that of single frames placed on the screen in quick succession. Therefore her image bursts,

¹ Robert Beavers, "Conversation about Terzen," in: *Ulrike Pfeiffer, Bärbel Freund, Ute Aurand: Filme*, 2004.

much like bricks and mortar, construct moving pictures out of fragments much like the labourers build up the museum wing from under the ground.

Throughout the film, Aurand develops a beautiful rhythmic pattern with her in-camera edits and intuitive use of the variable shutter. There is a musical quality to the way brief clusters of shots, complete with flash frames, lead into gestural pans. The manual fades that she employs—often in the same shot—invoke a series of revelations, a feeling further amplified by her cuts to color footage. Aurand shares her process of discovery: as the building unfolds before her, the film is constantly re-energized by new explorations of the architectural space. The museum alone is a stunning example of design, but Aurand’s ability to find new visual surprises in the myriad details of the building—using holes in the walls as frames, considering the shadows of a slatted stairwell, compressing the perspective on a series of latticed walls—moves this well beyond a document of a building into a passionate call to look.

The stream of consciousness of her earlier films is centered here through diversionary edits—the moment she cuts away from the construction site to take in the beauty of the surrounding park or to admire a sculpture. These serve as markers of time passing, brief allusions to the changing of seasons, as well as a foreshadowing of the museum’s completion and the art it will contain. Often highlighted in these moments is a formal precision, where Aurand finds an echo in nature, or in stone, to the action of the labourers she is following². What it also does is link the past to the present, by connecting the art and artifacts that the museum holds (Museum Reitberg is Switzerland’s only museum devoted to the arts from Asia, Africa, America and Oceania) to the present tense of the space they will inhabit, providing a sense of continuity that mirrors the architect’s desire to merge the new wing with the rest of the museum. A jarring edit at the beginning of film, where the ground-breaking ceremony is briefly juxtaposed with a Hindu ceremony becomes resonate through further edits throughout the film that link east to west, art and labour, nature and design (though, refreshingly, her linkages seek poetry more than equivalencies).

The final passage of the film, when the artifacts are installed, is introduced by a beautiful shot where a statue points his way to his plinth. His chariot is a dolly and his attendants are conservators, but there is still grandeur to his gesture (and a knowing smile when he is finally installed). The macro level of the previous construction is mirrored on a more life-sized scale, with pulleys that bring the statues into place, rather than cranes. Again Aurand privileges the gestures of the art works themselves, focusing on their hands and faces in a similar appreciation that she gave to the workers of the previous sections. The last sequence, where an ivory choir dances, reanimates the joy in the act of creation. In case the significance of the entire architectural undertaking is overlooked, Aurand finds it again in the gestures of tiny ancient dolls.

—Program Notes by Chris Kennedy—

² The most playful example being a cut from Krishna resting on a lotus pad to a worker taking a lunch-hour nap.