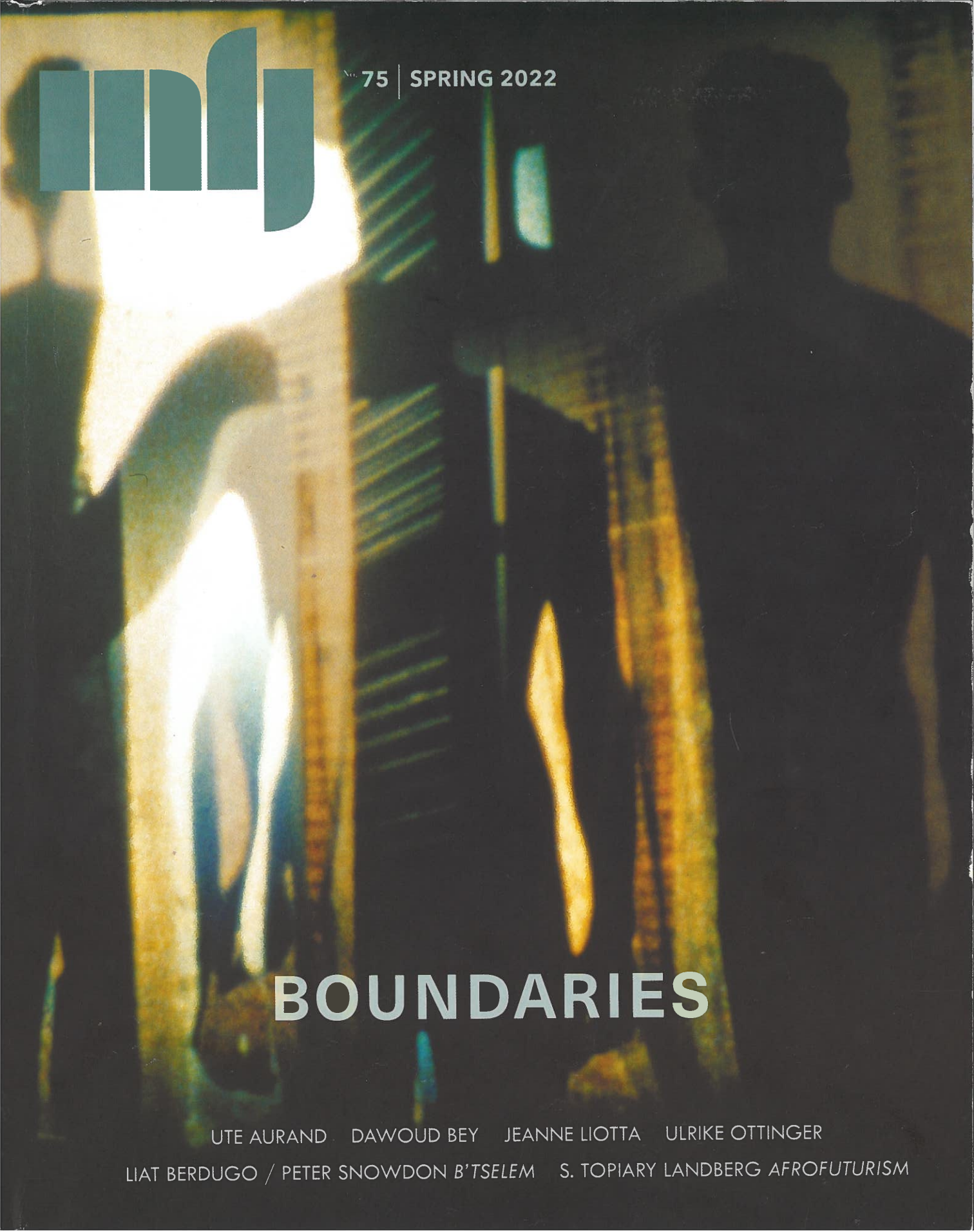

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BOUNDARIES

UTE AURAND DAWOUD BEY JEANNE LIOTTA ULRIKE OTTINGER

LIAT BERDUGO / PETER SNOWDON *B'TSELEM* S. TOPIARY LANDBERG *AFROFUTURISM*

Ute Aurand, *India* (2005), film still. Courtesy the artist.

IN THE REALM OF THE PERSONAL

A conversation with Ute Aurand

ARINDAM SEN

Filmmaker and curator Ute Aurand has been a prominent experimental film figure in Berlin for nearly four decades. Her filmmaking practice articulates a subjective approach to her surroundings, lending itself to the private tradition of diary films. The subjects of her films are drawn from the everyday, the people she comes across, the lands she travels to, her friends and her immediate environment. In the early 2000s, she traveled thrice to India resulting in her film *India* (2005), which later became part of a trilogy with *Young Pines* (*Junge Kiefern*, 2011) and *To be here* (2013) (respectively based on travels to Japan and the United States). *India* is captivating for a number of reasons: it avoids fixating on contrasting social realities between India and the West, it works outside of any trappings of description and didacticism, and it takes a non-rhetorical approach that values intricacies of framing, movement, rhythm, and gesture. Aurand is able to respond to the everyday—a smile, a walk, a sculpture—with the tenderness of a dweller and with the attentiveness of a portraitist.

The conversation that follows took place in her Berlin apartment in August 2020.

Arindam Sen: How did the project of *India* come about in the early 2000s? Were you in Pune just for the making of the film or were there other purposes for traveling to India?

Ute Aurand: I traveled to India because of my association with Yoga in Berlin since 1992. In the year 2000, I was offered a chance to participate in a teacher training program in Pune. It was also the year when my mother died and I thought, if I don't go now, I perhaps never will. At the back of my mind, I was planning to film there but I didn't know if this would mean a film by itself or just material for my archive. This lack of a definite motivation led me to a different psychological situation. It was really amazing—I landed in India, booked myself into a hotel and there I was! The first shot in the film was from my balcony in that hotel. When we travel, we travel with some expectations, but what will eventually

unfold is something not known a priori. I know that people who filmed in India, like Pier Paolo Pasolini, were deeply affected by the contrast of rich and poor—the caste hierarchies—but that wasn't something I was interested in. I was put in a flux of life, which was a great gift, and I started filming. When I came back from the first trip, I knew I had to continue.

AS: That is why you returned in 2002?

UA: Yes. It became clear that I could go back in 2002 for another teacher training and then again in 2004—a trip I undertook only for the purpose of filming. For the third and final trip, I looked for production support so that I could finish the film financially. During this period, there was of course a kind of correspondence. I shot some material, came back, looked at the footage and then repeated this. And everytime, things changed a little—the second time was not the first and the third time not the second. In 2004, I had a scooter and I was more independent to move around in the city. The first time is usually just about impressions, the surface of things, later one establishes contacts with people around and delves a bit deeper. This chronology in engagement at different levels is sustained in the film, not on a day-to-day basis but the difference is carried through.

AS: We have these passages of silence and then sequences where sound plays a central role. This alternating between silence and sound creates an aural terrain with its own sense of rhythm. This is of course not particular to *India* but can you elaborate a bit on using sound in this manner?

UA: My psychological state was one of a lone traveler. And when one is alone, there exists a special silence inside. You get to keep to yourself. And then there is the outside, especially in India, where sound is so fundamental in shaping the experience of a place, to an extent that it is easy to feel attacked by it. Some of my colleagues felt so, but I didn't. The traffic imparts a sense of being in a river and slowly the sound becomes an expression of depth. It is not only sound itself—it is linked to the people, the temples, and the traffic. Also by alternating between passages of sound and silence one can emphasize the presence of sound. There is this dialogue between the silence of the mind and the sound in the surroundings. Sometimes, though, it is really nice to leave the image alone and let it conjure its own meaning.

AS: Also one gets the feeling that the sound comes to you rather than you going out, seeking something in particular. It is as if the sound filters through to you in the environment that you are in. One gets to hear truncated Bollywood songs, devotional music, birds chirping, traffic, spoken words, etc. at various points as part of the soundtrack. Is that the whole basis of using sound or are there parts where sound is orchestrated?

UA: I am collecting sound independently. Sometimes I am recording sound while I am filming but it could also be that a situation is interesting to me only from the perspective of the sound, and in that case I don't film. Because of the Bolex, sound and image is always separated and I have to put it together. In a way that helps. If it is together, then you have to first separate it. But I don't have to do that. So you listen to the sounds, you know the sounds, and then you start building something up.

AS: Yes, exactly what you said. The images are recorded independently of the sound, desynchronized and non-diegetic mostly. But I get the feeling that how sound elaborates upon or describes the image is not always apparent. Do you see some kind of appropriateness between the sound and the image or do you let the effect emerge purely out of the juxtaposition of the two?
UA: It really depends on the situation. In editing, you build up this whole longer film from existing segments. And then comes this dramaturgic aspect—Where are we? Do we need silence or quiet? Is there something that the sound is saying, making some kind of interpretation of my feelings? How am I showing myself through the sound? How do I want to see the film or feel about what I am seeing?

AS: So it's not the one or the other.

UA: No, this is the power of the sound. In a way it is more powerful than the image. When I was in film school, we were often working at night in the editing rooms. And I remember while passing through a long corridor, hearing bits of classical music—very powerful and moving. I traced the source of the music, knocked on the door where it was coming from, and eventually found out that it was *Le Mépris* by Godard. I don't know why it was so, because it was not one of those famous Godard cuts where you hear some classical music and abruptly cut to some ordinary speech. But when I think of the power of Godard's films, I think about the way he uses sound.

AS: On the level of the image, there seems to be two ways in which rhythm is directed in editing, one through in-camera editing and other in a more conventional way, on an editing table. I am interested in knowing how these two editing techniques are made to function together? What drives the montage in your films when you are putting one segment next to the other?

UA: When I started filmmaking, there was only the montage, which was a way of matching what comes after and the articulation of meaning through the cut. I was fascinated by that. In film we can create time, we can go between spaces. After film school, perhaps partly due to lack of money and partly due to the influence of Jonas Mekas, in-camera editing was a way of creating rhythm while filming. That was how I tried to film, but later I combined the two modes of editing. These are two completely

Ute Aurand, *India* (2005), film still.
Courtesy the artist.

Ute Aurand, *India* (2005), film still.
Courtesy the artist.

different possibilities with film to create a new temporal sensibility. I don't try to edit in the camera by remembering shots—now I am filming in the temple and later I will film through my window—I don't do that. I leave the combining part to the editing table. After shooting only in-camera for a few years, I was a bit bored of the fast, kaleidoscopic aspect of it all, it was then that I wanted to return to the magic of montage. In *India* I wanted to keep some kind of continuity, so the work of montage is less but it's there. I like working with these two very different possibilities.

AS: For example, you have this sequence where the sun is setting. You cut to the face of the Buddha sculpture, another cut to a smiling face, then back to the Buddha and then back to the sunset.
UA: This is done through montage. The advantage of working at the editing table is that when you survey the images, you see different possibilities arising out of them. In this case, maybe subconsciously when I was at the Aurangabad caves, I looked at the Buddha, an eternal image, symmetric in proportion, very holistic on the one hand and then on the other, this beautiful face of the watchman, of flesh and bone, very commonplace, and perhaps the idea of the juxtaposition took shape there, but not in a totally explicit manner.

AS: Can you talk a little bit about the framing of the human figures in the film? The framing is usually tight implying that the figures occupy the space within the frame substantially and there seems to be some sort of continued oscillation between filming portraits/faces and gestures/limbs.

UA: This is connected to the people's movements. The hands are such an important part of expression. So are the feet, or the way in which people walk—sometimes barefoot. As the film progresses, I come a bit closer to the people. Everything physical in India is imbued with a sense of life, a stone in a temple is not just a stone. It is this fundamental idea that everything is alive. I have never experienced this before.

AS: What one does not see, for example, is the landscape and some sort of 'context' for the entire figure. You often start with the face, a kind of primary contact with the person, with which you have access to the expressions, because many people are smiling or in some cases reacting to the camera. It's not like people are filmed in a manner where they are unaware of the presence of the camera in an arcane, voyeuristic manner. Everything is upfront. So there isn't a mode of framing that is objective but it always is about your relationship to the figure and your association with the subject/model.

UA: I think I do it in other films as well. A kind of fragmenting—but then putting it together again. You have all these details but in the end there is this one unified image. Filming is also my way of discovery. It is a little bit of the process and to make you follow my process. Then in the end you may put it together or maybe not, I leave it to you.

AS: That's related to the next question, about the way of looking and reacting with the 16mm camera, switching it on/off. Even if you are looking at the movement in the profilmic, we don't get a continuous movement. If a person is moving, it's not just naturalistic documentary registration of the movement, but what you do is shoot the person and then stop-start-stop-start. There are these spatial jumps, which translate into some sort of temporal jumps, we don't get the identification of a person in a space. It's more about your eye reacting to the movement of this person and your filmmaking becoming an articulation of that reaction, rather than some objective description of the movement itself.

UA: Yes, that's right. I hope so at least. Sometimes I also feel my hesitation. Of course if you film people uninterrupted, it can be unpleasant and not so nice. My filming is more like a brief touch, but the brief touch can also be intensive. I was filming much faster in the 90s, now I have slowed down.

AS: Is that a way to react to a particular scenario? To see through the lens of the camera as one does through the eye?

UA: I don't think so. Because I think this whole aspect is physical, particularly with the handheld camera. I am moving around, a little bit like dancing. In the camera I see through, I have the quadrature of the frame that is some sort of a limitation separating a fragment from the whole. I know the idea of Brakhage that you are referring to, but I don't think it applies in my case.

AS: I recall Marjorie Keller speaking of Mekas' diary films and comparing them to women's diary literature and autobiography, which were only belatedly valued as literature. One can think of Marie Menken and Margaret Tait as filmmakers working in that tradition of Women's diary films, filmmakers whose films you have extensively programmed and also have published on. What kind of impact did their body of work have on you?

UA: In terms of style I think Mekas was more of an influence than Menken and Tait. On the other hand, he is always using his voice as some sort of commentary while speaking in a particular way, without which the films would have a very different intensity. I don't really say "I" in my films, but Mekas says it a lot. So I feel closer to Menken and Tait's cosmos. For me a special silence marks the works by the women filmmakers. Psychologically I feel closer to them. But then Tait and Menken are also different in certain ways. When I show the films by Tait to students, very often I have them saying that the filmmaker is amateurish and has no clue what she is up to. She allows certain idiosyncrasies in terms of movements while being fairly controlled about other aspects of filmmaking. Menken said that she never aspired to a film career. She was very casual about it, she spoke about her films as "little" films—which I like. She made a film like *Notebook* (1963) while Mekas was making a more traditional film, *Guns of Trees* (1961).

AS: *India*, as I understand now, is part of a trilogy along with two other films, *Young Pines* and *To Be*

Here. How did the idea of putting the three films together emerge?

UA: I finished making *India* and it had its own autonomous life. Then in 2009, a few Japanese friends whom I knew from Berlin in the 1990s invited me for a trip to Japan and arranged for me to show some films there. As always, I took my camera with me. It was also a country I felt very attracted to but the differences (with India) were interesting. I knew that every country is different in its own way and different aspects of your personality come alive in different countries. You have the external surface which consists perhaps of architecture and other aesthetic experiences, but then there is the inside of a society. In Japan, particularly, as a foreigner I felt that the inside was inaccessible to me.

AS: And then *To be Here*?

UA: After finishing the first two films, I had the idea of a trilogy, filming the third film in the United States. I am very often in the States these days due to my relationship with Robert Beavers. That film has several sections filmed in different parts of the States—New England and the Southwest. I also had different degrees of familiarity with different parts of the country and I think that also translates into the film.

AS: One thing stuck me in the contrast between *To Be Here*, the one that was shot in the US, and the two other films in the trilogy, is that in *To Be Here* there is a direct commentary on some of the social and political contradictions that are part of the American experience, which doesn't seem to be the case for the other two films. Is there a particular reason for that?

UA: Because I was not a blank piece of paper when I visited the States to make that film. I had been there before. So the film is not only the surface and first impressions. For me, it was not a place where to go and feel fascinated, but rather to develop questions.

Ute Aurand, *India* (2005), film stills. Courtesy the artist.