

# On the Visibility of Women's Experimental Cinema Birgit Hein and Ute Aurand in Germany

This is a draft / version of my [Sylvia Schedelbauer] contribution to  
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Within the German cultural landscape, experimental film is a term that has come to signify a highly contested arena of film-related activities. These can be said to reside somewhere between the art world, media art, and the film world, and the term itself is either dismissed as a historical category that ended sometime in the late 1970s, or disputed as unspecific and vague.<sup>1</sup> Yet, to this day, practitioners have continued to produce experimental cinema, arguably at low visibility: most of the work continues to be shown in self-organized spaces, some is presented at film festivals, and a handful is included in art exhibitions.

When considering the participation of women within the German scene, the histories of women in experimental film face the general obstacle of a lack of recognition of experimental film itself and the more specific problem of the difficulty of chronicling what were so often disparate pockets of activity. There have been a number of important efforts in making women's film work more visible, however, including *Blickpilotin* (1989–2007), which presented international film work by women, predominantly to a Berlin audience. Also, a decade-long project from 2004 to 2014, scholar Annette Brauerhoch built an archive at the University of Paderborn which focused on experimental films produced by women in the 1980s in West Germany. While building the project, a symposium and film program was organized in 2008, and in 2013, a publication on the topic provided an invaluable historical overview of women's experimental film production and culture of the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> In 2019, the Berlin International Film Festival held a retrospective program titled *Self-Determined. Perspectives of Women Filmmakers*, out of which came two publications (Herbst-Meßlinger & Rother, 2019; Klauß & Schenk, 2019). These are just a few examples of innovative work being done to investigate and bring to the public this lesser-known area of German filmmaking.

To approach the histories of experimental cinema made by women in Germany, I interviewed Birgit Hein and Ute Aurand, two iconic filmmakers of different generations. As a sort of additional framework for what follows, I end by briefly discussing my own development as a filmmaker and reflecting upon some of the issues raised in these conversations.



Still from *In Fear of Women*, image courtesy Birgit Hein ©

## A Conversation with Birgit Hein

The elder of the two filmmakers is Birgit Hein, who first became known for her work with her ex-husband Wilhelm Hein in the late 1960s. Both were considered pioneers of postwar, second-wave avant-garde film in West Germany. Under the moniker W&B Hein, they made structural films, performances, experimental narratives, and found footage films. The Heins also ran regular film screening series, introducing predominantly American, British, and Austrian experimental films to a German audience, while partially surviving by exhibiting Super 8 porn films before the genre was legalized in Germany. While Birgit gained recognition as one of the first writers who published academic texts about experimental films in Germany, artistically, she was regarded for a time as being in the shadow of Wilhelm, at least by some. It was not until she started making films on her own, after separating from Wilhelm at the end of the 1980s, that she was recognized as an artist in her own right. Her work was then widely shown in the festival circuit, as well as in feminist circles. Birgit made radically personal documentaries that contextualized her personal fears and struggle to be empowered; but she distanced herself decidedly from feminist politics. She largely worked on her own and for a while identified as a “lone fighter.” Approaching this conversation, I wanted to know how Birgit experienced working alongside Wilhelm as one of few female filmmakers in the 1970s. Initially curious as to what obstacles women faced and why W&B Hein included few women in their screening series, and why so few of the female artists who had come out of her famous film class, at the Art School in Braunschweig, managed to become as famous as a number of very well-known male figures;<sup>3</sup> as our conversation developed, it focused on her film *In Fear of Women* (1991).

Sylvia: Your evolution is from structural film to performance to narrative, and then to personal essay, I would say. Your work has also been called documentary. But how would you see it?

Birgit: Well, for example, when *Baby I will Make You Sweat* (1994) appeared, many of the documentary specialists said: “Okay, great, you opened up your language— to documentary language. You add new perspectives to documentary filmmaking.”

S: What are the specific perspectives that they meant?

H: The formalism. How I was working with the images.

S: Which could perhaps be called experimental.

H: Yes, and this is what people say: I mixed the experimental, or I introduced it to documentary filmmaking. The latest film that I made is called *Abstrakter Film* (2013). It’s a 10 minute long film using YouTube videos. People said only a person who comes from experimental film could make something like that. So, how I worked with the material was definitely in a certain aspect of filmmaking, formal filmmaking. I was delighted with YouTube, and now with mobile phone cameras, because this is a new aesthetic. From the beginning I have always been interested in the different aesthetic of a medium. In the beginning it was about film, about introducing film into the art world. Now it develops to more and more possibilities. Hi8 was also great, and then later Mini DV. You could take the camera off your eye, you didn’t have to look through the viewer anymore, you could hold the camera in any way you want. This was a completely new step and a new experience.

S: It’s also a different way of looking.

H: The problem with the Hi8 camera was that it was too light. The 16 mm camera was heavy, so I didn’t need a tripod. I just held my breath, and I had a stable image. With Hi8 I had to learn to hold it on my leg, to balance it, because in some situations it was impossible to have a tripod. A tripod would mark you as a professional — no way! Especially in Jamaica it was impossible to be a professional.

S: Why?

H: Everybody would have refused at once.

S: But isn’t there also a certain power relationship that you had through the camera?

H: No. I don’t think so. I hated this filming anyway. It was always a fight, a fight for the image, a fight for the situation. it was never easy to film in a public situation. With *In Fear of Women* I used found footage instead. I love found footage because you have complete control over the image, and you can decide. But to shoot was always very tiring for me. I made the film *La Moderna Poesia* (2000) in Cuba, and that was a different situation because everybody agreed to be filmed, nobody had problems. This pushed me into a situation where I couldn’t leave the camera. I always thought “I can shoot, I can shoot, I can shoot,” and when I came back I realized I should never do this because the camera separated me from life. In the end I felt the pressure to shoot because they allowed me to do it. And therefore I lived with the camera the whole time I was there. I had 16 hours of material from Cuba. With *Baby...* I had three. I decided that I never wanted to do it [that way] again.

S: Your personal films were considered feminist films. Did you ever have any interest in feminist work?

B: (laughs) This is the hot point. When I started to get into film festivals and so on in the late 1960s, around 1967, 1968, I was really the only woman. Of course I had read the Germaine Greer and Kate Millet, all of that literature, but I had no idea about feminism at that time. Then I started teaching in the early 1970s, and I met for the first time young female students, young women, and I loved them. But the feminist theory throughout the 1980s became extremely didactic. And, for example, when *Kali Frauen Filme* came out in 1988, I was attacked by these feminists because I had taken the footage showing these “women in prison” films, where everyone fights each other and then fights the guards, and the feminists’ idea was that “women don’t fight each other.” It was such a strong ideology that I was completely against it. I was just starting to find out who I am, and then suddenly the feminists say that women are peaceful, women don’t want sex, you know, Alice Schwarzer -

S: (laughs) Women don’t want sex?

B: Yeah, saying that women are only victims. The *Por-no!* campaign by Alice Schwarzer was a big deal. So I was completely put off by all that. I hated this ideology.

S: You hated the idea of the victimized woman, because you were a strong woman, right? You had a strong presence. I read that for female experimental filmmakers of specific generations, there wasn’t much in the way of recognition. They showed their films in some festivals or places, and maybe they were included in an article or interviewed, or they received mentions in magazines (Noll Brinkmann, 2013). But they didn’t seem to have the same job opportunities as their male counterparts, who had the opportunity to teach in their field. You did receive this recognition, however. You became a film professor.

B: Yes, but that was because I had published a book in 1971, and this changed things for me. In the beginning, the idea was always, “There is Wilhelm, and then there is his wife.” When the book came out, I had a completely different image already because all those men wanted me to write about them.

S: And you did.

B: But all the time, Wilhelm was seen as the major artist, until I made *In Fear of Women*. When this film was screened at the Berlinale, people suddenly said, “Okay, we have to rethink your whole history.” Then it was quite clear that *Love Stinks* (1982) was now attributed to me. Also, the following film, *Verbotene Bilder* (1985), from that point on, they saw me as the more important person who had made these films.

S: *In Fear of Women*. *Uncanny Women*. *Die unheimlichen Frauen*. The English title is slightly different from the German one.

B: There is no English translation for the word “unheimlich,” it’s a typical German word, like Angst, unheimlich. There is no direct translation for that.

S: I think some people use the word uncanny, as it does come close to the notion of *unheimlich*. Maybe it doesn’t literally translate it, but it comes close. Of course *In Fear of Women* has a completely different connotation than the German title. The film asks a lot of open questions. There is a lot of pain, and it has many wounds. I was brutally touched by it.

B: (laughs) It’s a horrible film.

S: Indeed it is a horrible film. It’s extremely violent. But I cried when watching it because I recognized where you were coming from—your anger and of course the fears that you discuss in the film. Even though perhaps people—women—experience these things internally, emotionally,

they may not get to talk about them. You discuss different forms of fear that women experience. The English title literally contains the word fear, which is a major theme in the film: fear of your own body, your breasts, your sexuality, but also fear of loneliness, fear of being a woman, fear of losing control. In your voice-over you say, “To suffocate in fear, to be obsessed with fear, fear of cancer, fear of guilt, the damn feelings of guilt are overwhelming. They make me cowardly, they make me responsible for everything that has been and that will be. . . . We cry when we think of our mothers. . . . ‘Mom, why didn’t you love me, even though I desperately loved you so much?’ Mom wasn’t aware that she tortured me this much. ‘I was always sweet to you.’ And I laugh. You think that subordination or adaptation is love, love in exchange for obedience.” It’s very much about irrational fears, about all kinds of fears.

B: You have forgotten one fear, that I talk about in the beginning, at the start of the film. The early goddesses were all frightening figures, and when I was working on this film I found this wonderful text by Karen Horney (Horney, 2017). She was a student of Freud, and in her book *Feminine Psychology*, there is one chapter titled *The Dread of Women*. And this was a very important insight for me, because then I realized that we as women live with a deep psychological fear that men have. We don’t even know that it exists. There is something there which we don’t know about. And now Jutta Brückner, a filmmaker, just published an article “The Unconscious Bias,” where she talks exactly about what I was doing in my film almost 20 years ago (Brückner, 2017). I kissed her for her article because I was so excited about what she wrote. There she talks about this deep psychological bias, deeply buried in the male unconscious.

S: But that would also be in the female unconscious? You said it at some point that “both women and men were afraid of the strong woman.”

B: Yes, okay. But during the very heavy separation from Wilhelm, I realized at some point that what he was accusing me of—I suddenly got the idea that his aggressiveness is something deep in him. What he was saying wasn’t about me.

S: I was deeply touched to hear you talk about your relationship to your mother. But do you think this is a generational thing? In a situation where women of another generation didn’t have the same opportunities that they see are now possible for their daughters, maybe that made an impact on how they treated their daughters and affected whether they gave them recognition or not.

B: First of all, my anger was the oppression of sexuality through this generation of mothers. That was the deep anger. Because this held us unfree. And they were the guards. They would transport this from their generation to us. It took me a long time to become an independent sexual being, and I realized that only if women can control their sexuality can they be free.

S: If they manage to liberate themselves.

B: Yes, liberate! That’s an important word! We were not liberated from this double moral, also coming from our Christian education. I grew up in the 1950s, you know.

S: It was a different time. In your film you talk about very specific fears, but also you talk about a very specific context of your personal education and maybe how you had your “non-sexual” education. But in a sense the film is still universal because I think there is still a lot of fear around bodies.

B: The old body! Terrible! Women getting old!

S: I think there are a lot of young women who fear their bodies. Fear of loneliness, fear of being a woman, fear of being overlooked, fear of losing control. Maybe that’s why it can be seen as

universal, and maybe that's why women of different backgrounds can probably relate, because, the fear is still there, although maybe for different reasons.

B: Yes. The whole beauty industry—how brutal has it become! In changing your appearance, pumping up breasts and asses, but also I mean the whole industry can only exist because of this old fear of women aging and losing their attractiveness. This is in the beginning of *Baby*. My body seemed no longer to be my own. Aging is like an illness.

S: I recognize that's a quote from the film: "aging is like an illness." But there are people who try to take things positively, who are "body positive," who embrace aging, own it, and feel empowered. But perhaps they are a minority. The film that came before (although not directly before), called *Kali Filme* (1988), is also about fear, but it's a different kind of fear. It goes in a different direction. It's not about the subconscious fear that women may carry, but it is about an image that various male filmmakers have constructed and projected, of these strong, sexually liberated women who can fight like men. It offers a different perspective.

B: I was really heavily accused, and I had to defend myself. Women can also have violent fantasies. All this ideology was so heavy in the end of the eighties. For example, Cleo Uebelmann—have you heard of her film *Mano Destra* (1986)? She is a Swiss filmmaker who in 1990 made this film about bondage between two women. When the film was shown in Munich, some women went up to the projection booth and pulled the film out of the projector. Because it was not allowed to show a woman binding another woman—women don't do that! It was a stupid time! But, for example, with this anti-pornography campaign, a group of women said this is censorship, and they produced a small magazine called *Caught Looking*. It had beautiful pornographic pictures, so they must also have been a movement against this control. This *Por-no!* campaign in my eyes was a completely new form of control.

S: Did you consider what you were making feminist films, feminist statements?

B: No, because at that time they were going against the official feminism. I had fun. *Kali Frauen Filme*, for example—it was complete pleasure for me to make this film.

S: Because it's so exaggerated?

B: Yes! It expressed my feelings...

S: In a sense it was liberating?

B: Yes, of course.

S: Do you feel that they made an impact on the audiences, or did you largely get a negative response?

B: I showed *Kali Frauen Filme* very early on in the United States, and it immediately became a cult film, people laughed. In Germany, nobody would laugh at the first screenings, because the Americans were much more used to these trash films. The Germans were not familiar with them. And I also heard that in London the audience loved *Kali Frauen Filme*. This was the first film that I showed to my grandson. Because for the other films, he is still too young. He loved it very much. He had so much fun. Because in his generation the gender discussion is everywhere. They have YouTube stars who talk about gender, and he calls himself a feminist. We didn't discuss these issues when I was in school! But this is one of the main interests at the moment, to find their identity, to present themselves openly.

S: Do you find that after you showed your films that you found a little more solidarity? Did anything change for you, or did you still feel like a lone fighter?

B: No. You know when *Fear of Women* was shown at the Berlin Film Festival, this was the big embrace. *Baby...* was also shown at the Berlin Film Festival, so that was...no, not at all. I didn't feel like a lone fighter.

S: Were you aware of different associations that were showing or promoting women's films, like film clubs or film screening series, for example Blickpilotin or others? Or different screening series that were trying to show works by women? In Berlin or Hamburg?

B: I never liked women's contexts so much. And in general, I wasn't featured much in the women's community. But there is a book...of course...*Aufzeichnungen zu Frauen und Filmen (Recordings on Women and Films)* (Lenssen & Schoeller-Bouju, 2014). This book is by women and about women. There is this association Pro Quote Regie (Pro Quota Filmmaker), and the women who published this book are involved with them. But even now, I don't feel...when they have big events, that I have to be...of course I am invited...but I don't see it as an area of struggle for me anymore. But when it all started, something like the quota initiative was seen as something negative. Nobody, or at least I didn't want to be a "quota woman." So this has changed a little.

S: Because it made it sound like a "quota woman" was only there as a token, not because her work was good.

B: Yes, because you are a woman so you have to be included.

S: You've always pushed your own limits, your personal and physical limits, in a sense you could say you were transgressive. What did this strategy mean to you? How do you work with this kind of pushing borders? I am not talking about the avant-garde, because you kept on pushing, even—or especially—in your personal documentaries.

B: But it comes from the avant-garde! That was the beginning. You had to push limits. And you have to push yourself and overcome your fears, you know. And this was extremely present when making *In Fear of Women*.

S: And that's what you say in the very end, that you had to "liberate your shell," that you wanted to "explode it."

B: Yes, and I also wanted to provoke the audience. For example, there is this image of a woman friend of mine pissing into the camera. My idea was that this was the ultimate provocation. But this part always causes laughter, and no protest, no protest at all.

S: Because nowadays that's not provocative anymore.

B: But I thought it would be, for example. And then I wondered what the reaction of men was after they saw the film. Some young men, especially young men—not masses of them—came to me and said: "Now we understand our mothers better."

S: (laughter) Oh! Okay!

B: I thought that was important.

S: Provocation, pushing boundaries, exploding boundaries, being transgressive—I thought that was definitely a strategy that -

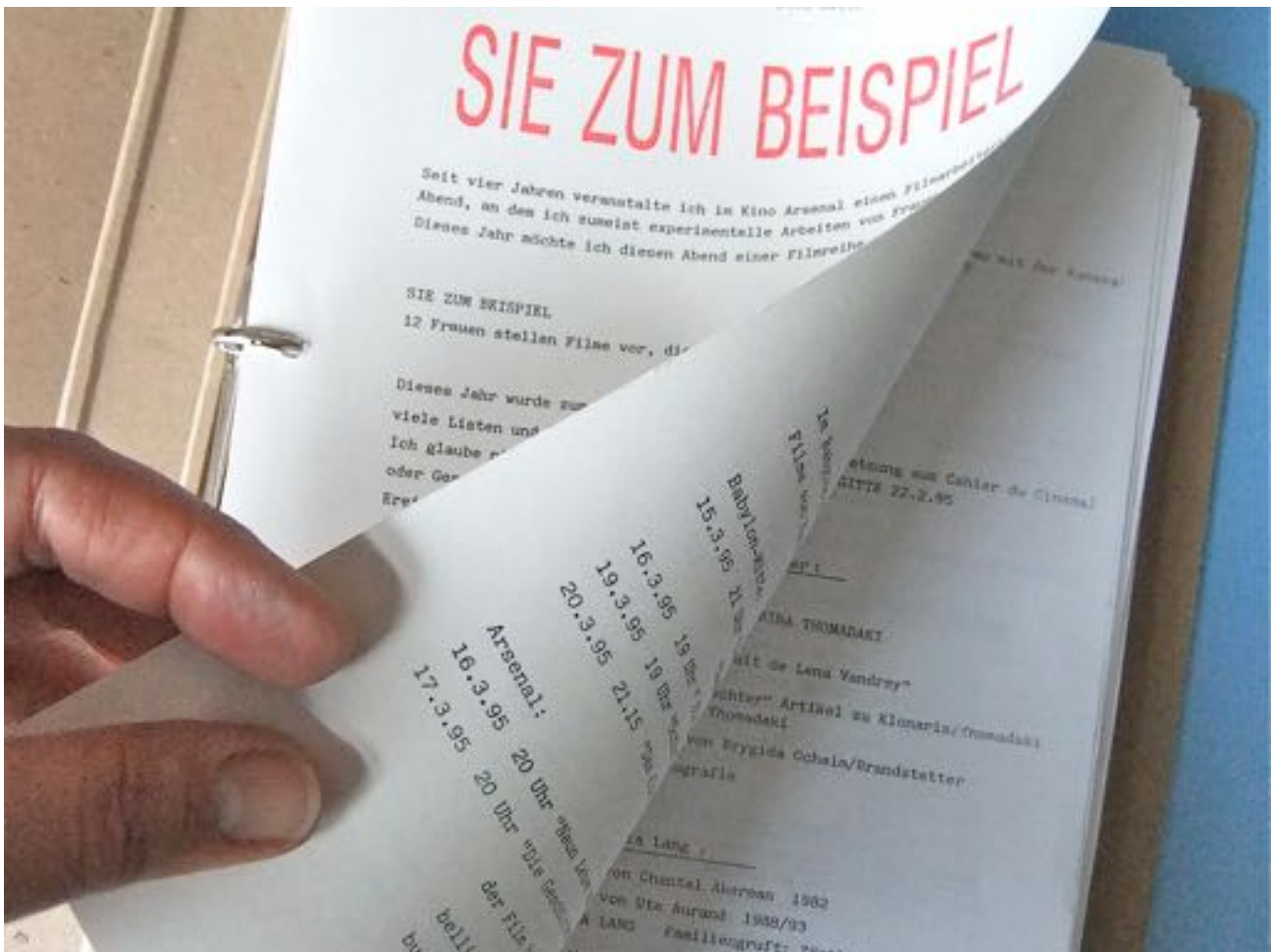
B: It was a strategy very strongly used in the seventies and eighties, too, such as in the super 8 *Cinema of Transgression*. What was very important for us, at least in the beginning, was the need to do something. For example to show films in a cinema, and to show political films, and to show Otto Mühl's films. There was a need and we wanted it, you know. At the moment, I don't feel it. But maybe this is always the old people who say, "When we were young, things were better."

S: "We were radical."

(Laughter)

B: We *were* radical.

### A Conversation with Ute Aurand



*She for example.* Documentation of film screening series, image courtesy by Ute Aurand ©

From her early student days at the German Film and Television School in Berlin (dffb), Ute Aurand set out to showcase women's experimental cinema, often in close collaboration with filmmaker friends. The dffb was known for documentary and political films, and as a gathering place for highly politicized film-makers. Among the first to study at the film school in 1966 were Harun Farocki, Hartmut Bitomsky, and Helke Sander, all of whom would go on to become influential filmmakers. In 1979, when Ute commenced her studies, her film class was the first in the history of



the film school that had more female students than male students. A change of direction at the school led to the pursuit of a more artistic cinematic language, largely informed by women's voices. Starting with spontaneous screenings where Ute would take a film projector to bars and cafes, she went on to tour communal cinemas in Germany with Ulrike Pfeiffer, to present women's films from her class. From 1990-95, Ute presented the film series "Filmarbeiterinnen-Abend" at Kino Arsenal, Berlin, featuring mostly experimental films made by women. In a project supported by women's cultural funds sponsored by the Berlin senate, Ute organized a year-long project titled "Sie zum Beispiel" (Her, for Example) at Kino Arsenal and Kino Babylon-Mitte; a monthly showcase in which 12 women filmmakers presented a personal choice of films by other women filmmakers. For the film screening series "FilmSamstag" (1997–2007), Ute collaborated with a group of friends and filmmakers, and started expanding the monthly film programs to include male filmmakers. For Ute, it was crucial to present films, not only in order to build a community of friends and a support network for women. But it was also part of a process of educating herself on the histories of women's experimental film. Curating and presenting films was always parallel to her own filmmaking, which includes more than 30 films in the past three decades.

Sylvia: Can you tell me why or how you started organizing film programs?

Ute: I had just began at the Berlin film school called Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin in Autumn 1979, when Christiane Kaltenbach and Hildegard Westbeld from the Initiative Frauen im Kino (Women in Cinema Initiative) came to the dffb to ask if someone would be interested to continue their series Women Cinema. They were a bit of a different generation from mine and had shown exclusively films by women for women weekly at the venue called Cinema between 1977 and 1979. I liked the idea selecting films by women for women, so some students from the Art School and I continued as a loose group. We didn't have a cinema. We were just thinking about who among us would want to show what. We took a 16 mm projector to places like the women's coffee bar Orlanda, which was here in Kreuzberg, and later to Cafe am Winterfeld, also a place exclusively for women in a squat, and we screened films like Sally Potter's *Thriller* (1979) and the early films of Marguerite Duras, Maya Deren, and Ulrike Ottinger. It was fascinating to bring these films to women who had never seen this kind of cinema. Also, for me, the films opened up new directions.

S: How often did you do these screenings?

U: Quite regularly, maybe once a month, but we stopped after one year.

S: You had seen some experimental films before you showed Maya Deren's films.

U: Yes, but I was not thinking in the category "experimental." I was interested in this or that specific film like Jonas Mekas's *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972), which I saw by chance in a series of diary films in the Arsenal 2 (a tiny room with ten seats in the distribution office of the Arsenal with the projector in the room). I experienced in Mekas's film an intimacy and beauty which created a feeling of freedom and changed my idea of filmmaking quite fundamentally.

S: Was it in the old Arsenal building in Schöneberg? Was this a regular showcase, or just a group of friends getting together?

U: The Mekas screening was part of Alf Bold's *Diary Series* in Arsenal 2, which was at that time in the Arsenal's distribution office where only a few screenings took place. The Arsenal itself was in the regular cinema next door. Bold was a co-founder of the Arsenal, and he was responsible for buying a lot of prints of the New American Cinema—films by Stan Brakhage, Warren Sonbert, Bruce Baillie, Ken Jacobs, Anita Thacher, Robert Breer, etcetera. Alf's *Diary Series* was really important for me. In addition to *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* I saw a film by Rudolf Thome and Cynthia Beatt, *Beschreibung einer Insel* (1979) and thought "Aha, these are films which

have personal voices of an 'I' speaking." At the dffb no experimental works were shown. Neo-realists, Eisenstein and Vertov, the French cinema, Godard, Peter Nestler, Straub/Huillet were being shown. But then I brought in the filmmaker and camera woman Elfi Mikesch as our teacher. (The dffb was self-organized, with no tenured professors.) Elfi showed us films like Kenneth Anger's *Eaux d'Artifice* (1953), Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour* (1950), and other, longer films. This was eye-opening. I was just starting out and looking. One sees this and that, and I did not know yet in which direction to go.

S: Do you feel that there were other like-minded filmmakers who were interested in the same kind of films as you, or were you alone with what you were doing?

U: In 1979 twelve women and seven men started at the dffb. Ulrike Pfeiffer, Bärbel Freund, Ilona Baltrusch and I were among the twelve. Ulrike and Ilona were much older and they had studied at art schools before, so their way of thinking about film was inspiring to me. They were my first teachers. Ilona's first film *Flug durch die Nacht* (1980) is 90 minutes long, and it was filmed 1 : 1 [meaning that its finished version includes everything she shot]. Ulrike worked for her first film *Das Ist ein Ende* with the artist Padeluum who made the soundtrack. I made *Schweigend ins Gespräch Vertieft* (1980) which got the CinePro Experimental Film Prize given for the first time at the Oberhausen festival in 1981. It was an interesting moment in the beginning of the 1980s because new experimental films — a lot of them by women — were made at the dffb and art schools. In 1981 Bold went on a U.S. film tour with "New German Films," and that same year Ulrike and I organized a tour with our first films called "Experimental Films By Women," which we took to eight German Kommunale Kinos (Communal Cinemas). Alongside our own work we showed films by Rosi S.M., Ebba Jahn, Ilona Baltrusch, Monika Funke Stern and Jaschi Klein.

S: So you organized it yourselves and said, "Let's go and show these films."

U: Yes, with the help of Karl Winter, who worked in the dffb - distribution. Ulrike and I came up with the idea of making a film together during this tour. With two Bolexes and two Sony Walkmans we filmed *Umweg* (1983), mainly moving landscapes out of the train window and in between each other. *Okiana* (1983) was our next film, which we made together in the seminar with Elfi Mikesch; we transformed the dffb building into an ocean liner. The dffb at that time was very open and we could realize our own ideas, but still I was surrounded by future film-makers who wanted to make either art house films or serious documentaries. So I had to find my own way. A very important moment after film school was when Ulrike and I saw another Mekas film at the Berlinale in 1986 (*He Stands in a Desert Counting the Seconds of His Life* [1986]). We were inspired and immediately wanted to go out and make a film. We asked the dffb for their Bolex camera and filmed with five minutes of film material the first part of what would become *Oh! Die Vier Jahreszeiten* (1988). We decided the music before filming and edited in camera, and it worked so well that we developed the idea of filming the four seasons: summer in Paris, spring in Moscow and finally autumn in London. This was a new beginning for me. I bought a Bolex and an editing table, and I knew I would not be making art house movies.

S: When did you realize that you wanted to start your own film series?

U: The idea came out of the 10th anniversary of the Verband der Filmarbeiterinnen (Association of Female Film Workers) in 1990. The Verband was a kind of alternative women's union for every woman connected to film and television. This association, like Pro Quote now, demanded 50% of the subvention money, 50% female film jury members — we wanted 50% of everything, and more. So it was an important network, and during the 10th anniversary celebrations, the idea was born to show once a month films by women directors at the Arsenal. Erika Gregor, member of Filmarbeiterinnen and a founder of the Arsenal, liked the idea, so Maria Lang and I started in June

1990 our first double program with *Wanda* (1970) by Barbara Loden and Angelika Levi's *Auf Geht's. Aber Wohin?* (1989), a short experimental fiction. "Filmarbeiterinnen Abende" (Women Filmworker's Evening) became our platform to show the films we wanted to show. The one rule: only films by women. Then Maria moved to southern Germany to take care of her mother, and I continued alone. I showed more and more experimental films, along with other films I was interested in. I had to research to find women filmmakers I hadn't heard of before. I showed films by Marie Menken, Margaret Tait, Helga Fanderl, Agnes Martin, Utako Koguchi, Gunvor Nelson, students from the Art School, films from the Filmmakers Co-op in London, and many others. Different people told me about different filmmakers: Madeleine Bernstorff mentioned the Scottish filmmaker Margaret Tait; Mekas said to look at Helga Fanderl's work; I discovered Agnes Martin's only 16 mm film *Gabriel* (1976) in the catalog of the Serpentine Gallery; a friend told me Gunvor Nelson was visiting Berlin; Yumi Machigumi from Oberhausen sent me a VHS tape of the Japanese filmmaker Utako Koguchi's 16 mm films (which I liked so much that I invited Utako to travel with her films to five German cities). It was very exciting to be forced to show only women's work and dig out forgotten treasures like Marie Menken. I had seen Menken's *Notebook* (1962) and *Dwightiana* (1959) before, but now I bought all her films for the distribution of the Arsenal, as well as a lot of Tait prints. We made both Menken and Tait booklets and brought their films to German and Austrian Cinemas. The "Filmarbeiterinnen Abende" existed for five years, from 1990 to 1995. I started again in 1997 with Renate Sami and Theo Thiesmeier. At this point I thought I didn't need a cinema to show this kind of film. I was thinking — and still think — of a Film Chapel where you would sit in peace and watch films, maybe just one short film. The darkness is important to allow concentration and contemplation. But with Renate it couldn't be realized at that moment, so we went back to the cinemas, to Babylon Mitte, and we started the "Filmsamstag" monthly series there, from 1997 to 2007.

S: It's interesting to hear how you were organizing yourselves to educate yourself and watch and discuss films at home.

U: By 1990 there were many different things going on. Die Blickpilotin (another association of women to show women filmmakers) had just started and to celebrate their founding they showed Marie Menken's *Notebook*, which I saw there for the first time. In one section is an image of a tiny white duck swimming along the upper edge of the frame from the right — this image remains unforgettable! With Menken, there is always a special mixture of intuition and thought, that's her strength! So, I saw the Menken *Notebook* and wanted to buy all her films. It's like a wonderful puzzle, how things come together.

S: Were there many alternative film screening series that you were aware of?

U: In the 1980s and early 1990s, there were different small groups like the FSK Kino, which started out small in Wiener Strasse, the Sputnik Zwei (although it was a bit of a different scene there), the Eiszeit Kino (sometimes they showed something interesting), and the Kino im KOB in a squatted house in Potsdamer Strasse, where Regina Schütze showed some experimental films. But these experimental film screenings were mostly single events that occurred here and there, and things were a little spread out. If someone had an idea, they did a program. When one is speaking about history, it's difficult because there are so many parallel worlds, and you only know where you were. I was always more interested in a poetic cinema and not in the kind of experimental cinema that works with the materiality of film itself—there are so many different directions. Thinking about what was going on in the city, I probably have forgotten some people who may have been important. You could say there were different alternative showcases, here and there, but I wasn't really connected to any of them because I always screened my programs at cinemas that were institutions. It was only with Frauenkino that we ran around with a projector and showed films in different spaces.

ilmarbeiterinnen Abend am 13. 1. 94 um 20 U  
DONNERS'

# Gabriel

1976

von der amerikanischen Malerin

## AGNES MARTIN

*When people go to the ocean they like to see it all day ...  
There's nobody living who couldn't stand all afternoon in  
front of a waterfall. It's a simple experience, you become  
lighter and lighter in weight, you wouldn't want anything  
else. Anyone who can sit on a stone in a field awhile can see  
my painting. Nature is like parting a curtain, you go into it.  
I want to draw a certain response like this. ... Not a specific  
response but that quality of response from people when they  
leave themselves behind, often experienced in nature – an  
experience of simple joy... the simple, direct going into a field  
of vision as you would cross an empty beach to look at the  
ocean.*

AGNES MARTIN 1966

S: Do you feel that a community formed around the programming?

U: Yes, these screenings were always social events. At the “Filmarbeiterinnen” series in the Arsenal, we often discussed the films over drinks after the screenings. The same with “Filmsamstag,” where every month on a Saturday evening we watched the films and went out for drinks and to talk. The opportunity to see these rare films definitely created a community. The main problem was that there were and still are so few opportunities to see these films. With “Filmsamstag” there were seven of us who curated individual programs, so our programs were quite diverse. I really liked having different people showing their selections. We started to know each other’s tastes.

S: Do you feel that some filmmakers grew out of this community?

U: I really don’t know. I wonder...

S: It seems like you certainly grew with this as a filmmaker.

U: Yes, certainly, I grew with it.

S: And maybe this influenced your own practice.

U: Of course! I saw a lot, I learned a lot. And I think we inspired others.

S: Can you describe what kind of film interests you when you talk about poetic film?

U: Well, what do they have in common? I think these are films which are basically more personal and visual. It’s difficult to generalize. There are films like Peter Hutton’s, which I wouldn’t say were very personal. But they are films where you can feel the filmmaker behind the images. For me there is always a three- way dialogue, between the filmmaker, the film, and myself [as a viewer]. There are also films like the ones by Margaret Tait, which really can’t be categorized. Her camera movements and her editing are so individual. Some people think it’s amateurish, but she shows her spirit in her movements, in her editing, and I can feel the voice of the filmmaker. The same with the silent films of Jeannette Muñoz. It’s like a poem: with poetry, you really need to feel connected to the person who wrote it, because if this feeling of connection is not there, the poem or the film falls into a thousand pieces and doesn’t tell you anything. The more professional a story or drama is, the more you merely follow it. Of course millions of people feel the same emotion when they see such films, like *E.T.* (1982), but this is not why I go to the cinema. With poetic films, you probably have only a few people connected to the filmmaker’s vision. It lies in the nature of this filmmaking, in its openness, and usually only a minority connects to the work. For me it’s always a great pleasure and happiness to sit in a dark cinema with space between me and the film. There, I enjoy seeing the world through certain film- makers’ eyes and to share their sensuous and personal creations. That’s why I call it poetic cinema.

S: What about political? Your motivation to show women’s films at that time was political, the act of creating a space to show women’s work was itself political.

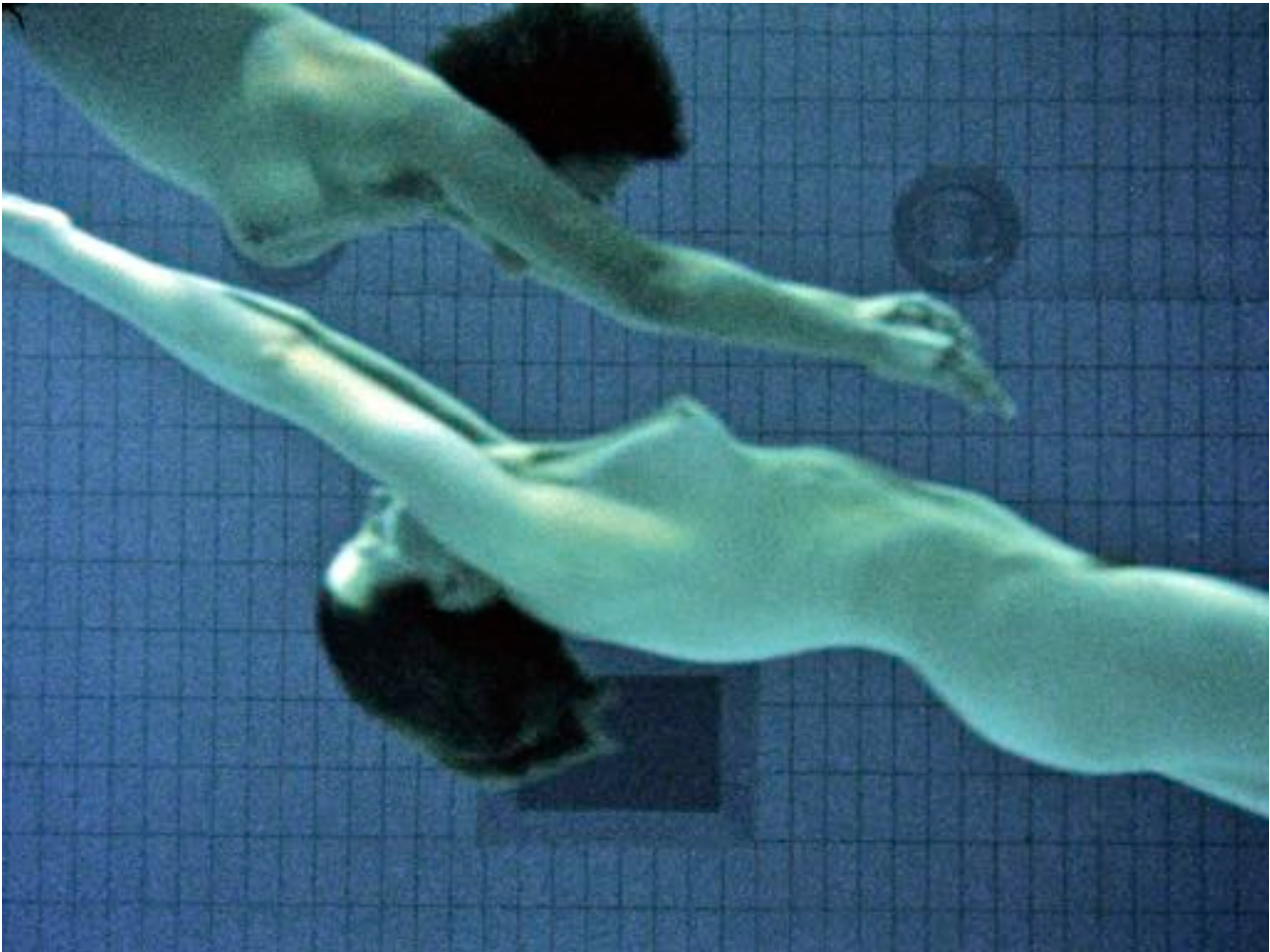
U: In the 1970s and 1980s there was a lot of discussion around feminism, and there were special events that were exclusively for women, like the early “Initiative Frauen Im Kino,” and there was always the discussion about whether that was okay or not. When we started the film series “Filmarbeiterinnen Abende” we thought it would only be for the members of the association, so naturally the audience would have been women. Then we decided just to show films by women for a general public. So the political effect was, you could say, an after-effect. I just did it: I showed

films by women and it became political when I suddenly realized that I was showing a lot of work which was never shown and was almost forgotten. Of course this had a lot to do with the position of women in our society. Much work by women disappears, and their network isn't as strong and functional as that of men. I realized it also in the Kidlat Tahimik interview with Aily Nash (Nash, 2013). I read about how he met Werner Herzog, and then he met this guy and that guy. This whole network was already there when he started in the 1970s. There is not a single woman which appears in this whole interview, except his German wife, who of course had a big influence, but the entire professional world he describes is all male. There is a lot of competition, but there is also help and understanding or encouragement [between men]. All this encouragement and all this help to focus on your own work and to believe that what you are doing is so important. This is simply not the same for women. We are so often doubting what we are doing. We have so much to learn about being more confident. Those five years when I focused on women's work was really very important for me.

S: I do get the feeling that, with the "Filmarbeiterinnen" screening series, because there was no network in place, as there would have been for men, you created your own space for dialogue. You were looking, you were researching, you were presenting, sharing work and discussing work. But this must have had a strong impact on your own practice as a filmmaker: to have a necessary space to unfold and discover and grow.

U: I definitely grew by showing other women filmmakers' work. It echoed back into how I thought about my own filmmaking. After I stopped doing the "Filmarbeiterinnen" series, I made a special one-year program called "Sie zum Beispiel" (She for Example), with a lot of financial support from the Künstlerinnenprogramm (art fund for women filmmakers) for monthly screenings at the Arsenal and Babylon Mitte (Aurand, 2010). I wanted to rediscover women filmmakers to celebrate the 100 years of film and asked different filmmakers, artists and one philosopher to choose a woman filmmaker, who was really important for them. If the person I asked was a filmmaker herself, we also showed her films. So in that year we made a lot of discoveries, we showed 72 films, like *Daddy* (1973) by Niki de Saint Phalle, *Pianeta Venere* (1972) by Elda Tattoli, films by Storm de Hirsch, Shirley Clarke, Mabel Normand and others. It really gave me confidence to see all these women who realized their own visions. A few found their place in film history, many are almost forgotten, and others never wanted to enter the professional world or withdrew from it. What I've learned from the different lives and careers of women filmmaker's and women in general is that the invisible is a great force. I always thought that mothers are the real philosophers because their exclusion from the "visible world" lets them see and feel the world differently, more like poets. The invisible is a reality.





Still from *Deeply Absorbed in Silent Conversation*, Image Courtesy Ute Aurand ©

## Concluding Reflections

At the age of 25, I dropped out of the University of Arts Berlin because I simply wasn't coping. I was studying sculpture with a male professor under the German "master class" system. I had to "explain" my mixed German-Japanese heritage almost on a daily basis, and was also subjected to intense racism and sexism. While my reasons for dropping out were complex, I was disillusioned enough to think that art making simply wasn't for me, and that I wasn't cut out to exist in the highly competitive, patriarchal system, where students seemed to complicitly reproduced hyper-capitalist, neo-liberal values of self-fetishization, self-marketing and self-exploitation.

I moved back to Japan, the country I was born and had grown up in, and tried to move on. A couple of years went by, but I couldn't help feeling defeated. I wondered whether I might forever regret dropping out of college without a degree. So I decided to return to Berlin, to complete my studies under one condition: to study with a woman. I joined the master class of Katharina Sieverding, who was a second wave feminist photographer. Katharina, herself a student of Joseph Beuys, created a highly politicized space in which students learned to carve out their own paths through excruciating processes of self-scrutiny. We were mandated to take classes in post-colonialism, philosophy, visual culture, gender studies, and feminist studies, and our discussions about student work were rigorous, existential, and cut to the bone.

In 2001, when I went back to University, approximately 70% of students at the University of Arts Berlin were female. Gender equality was far from acceptable: 38% women had jobs in lower positions, 26% in middle teaching positions, and only 15% of master classes were led by women

(Haase, 2007). From my perspective, part of the problem was rooted in the fact that there were not enough female role models, and that, as Ute Aurand mentioned in our discussion, women didn't have the same networks and support systems to tap into as their male counterparts.

I gravitated toward experimental film by mere happenstance. At university, I took a class on war photography where I got an assignment to produce work around the theme of war photography, and as a result, I made my first personal documentary using photos from my family's archive. At the time, I didn't know that personal documentaries were a genre, and I had never heard of avant-garde or experimental films. Later, in a found footage film class taught by Madeleine Bernstorff, I saw *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies Under America* (1992) by Craig Baldwin, one of a few influential films that expanded the horizon of possibilities for me. Craig happened to visit Germany to give a workshop, where I learned about the West Coast experimental film culture and found footage traditions. I ended up spending a good amount of time in San Francisco, working part-time editing Craig's feature film *Mock Up on Mu* (2008) and getting to know the history and practice of the Bay Area's independent and experimental film culture. There, once again, I found myself plunged into a field dominated by men.

As a woman, I have learned that I have to fight twice or three times as hard as my male counterparts. Not because of the nature and precarity of the work itself, but because of negative social biases based on gender, and race. Opinions seemed to be taken more seriously coming from men, and technical know-how stated by a woman was more easily discredited or ignored. When working with men, either as an editor, archival researcher, or as a member of a film lab, in order to move a project forward I have had to learn strategies in which to subtly suggest ideas that men would then later present as their own. In other words, a whole different set of parameters seemed to apply when entering a male dominated field as a woman. Historically, success seemed to come more easily if women collaborated with, or contextualized themselves with men.

Ever since I began making experimental films, I have been interested in being involved in film culture on different levels. That is to say, not only do I want to make work, but it is equally important to present films, organize screenings or live cinema events, support other filmmakers, and collaborate in various ways — as by editing, researching, and writing about films whenever the opportunity arises. Maybe mine can be considered a holistic approach to a personal culture of cinema, clearly stemming from the predominantly self-organized, grassroots pockets of experimental film cultures I have gotten to know through my work at Artists Television Access and Other Cinema in San Francisco and LaborBerlin in Germany. (Later, I became part of a more professionalized film institution as part of the selection committee at the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen.) I can identify in part with both Birgit's and Ute's trajectories even though both are very different: I share Birgit's sense of having to struggle independently, and like Ute, I value how the practice of programming provides an opportunity for collective discovery, as it creates and keeps alive alternative communities, networks, and spaces.

A lot has changed and improved, and the German cultural landscape has become a lot more diverse, although this is still only marginally reflected in the art or film world. Yet the very definition of a German film production has become, arguably, more transnational, with large constituencies of artists coming from other European and non-European countries to contribute to that culture from a shared base in Berlin and other German cities. Unsurprisingly, women are still under-represented and under-recognized, and there is still a descending hierarchy of marginalization based on gender and race. But what has changed radically, compared to the time when Birgit and Ute were younger, is that there are more and more filmmakers who are coming from a transnational experience and who reflect this in their practice in a culturally-aware manner. The local level still exists, but to me, it can feel a little suffocating. I find more affinities with an ever growing international community of filmmakers based in different places. There are the old hubs of production that usually serve as



points of historical reference and still host large gatherings of filmmakers, such as London, Los Angeles, New York, Paris, San Francisco, Tokyo and Toronto; but now we are more aware of the communities that thrive in places like Bangalore, Bangkok, Buenos Aires, Johannesburg, Kairo, Manila, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Seoul and Sydney. While these pockets of experimental and artists' film productions are usually dominated by men, nonetheless there are women's voices, old and new, making themselves heard. I look forward to learning about the ones we have not yet discovered.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For example, in a 2009 German symposium whose title can be translated as "Experimental film today: Gone lost between art and cinema?," Lars Henrik Gass, director of the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, gave a lecture in which he presented a large number of hypotheses about experimental film in Germany. Among these was his claim that "the term experimental film was completely unspecific," mainly owing to the lack of academic writing on the history of the practice, which left the term entirely vague (Gass, 2009). According to Gass, this lack of a defining discourse has led to the term's generous usage in competitive fields of cultural recognition, such as film funding or awards for the category "experimental film." The latter case includes, arguably, any work that somewhat deviates from linear narrativity; increasingly, it also encompasses those works that have established themselves in the gallery-based art world and have been receiving recent accolades. The dual perception voiced by Gass, that the term is used in an imprecise manner and that it has been appropriated by cultural organizations and funding bodies in overly inclusive, perhaps even contradictory ways, is, in my view, widely shared.
- <sup>2</sup> *Femme Totale* (Dortmund) and *Feminale* (Cologne) were the first two film festivals, founded in the 1980s, that presented women's films only. Later, in 2006 both festivals fused to form the International Women's Film Festival Dortmund/Cologne.
- <sup>3</sup> Among the graduates from Birgit Hein's class are Christoph Girardet, Bjørn Melhus, Matthias Müller, Caspar Stracke, Florian Wüst, and Peter Zorn.

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