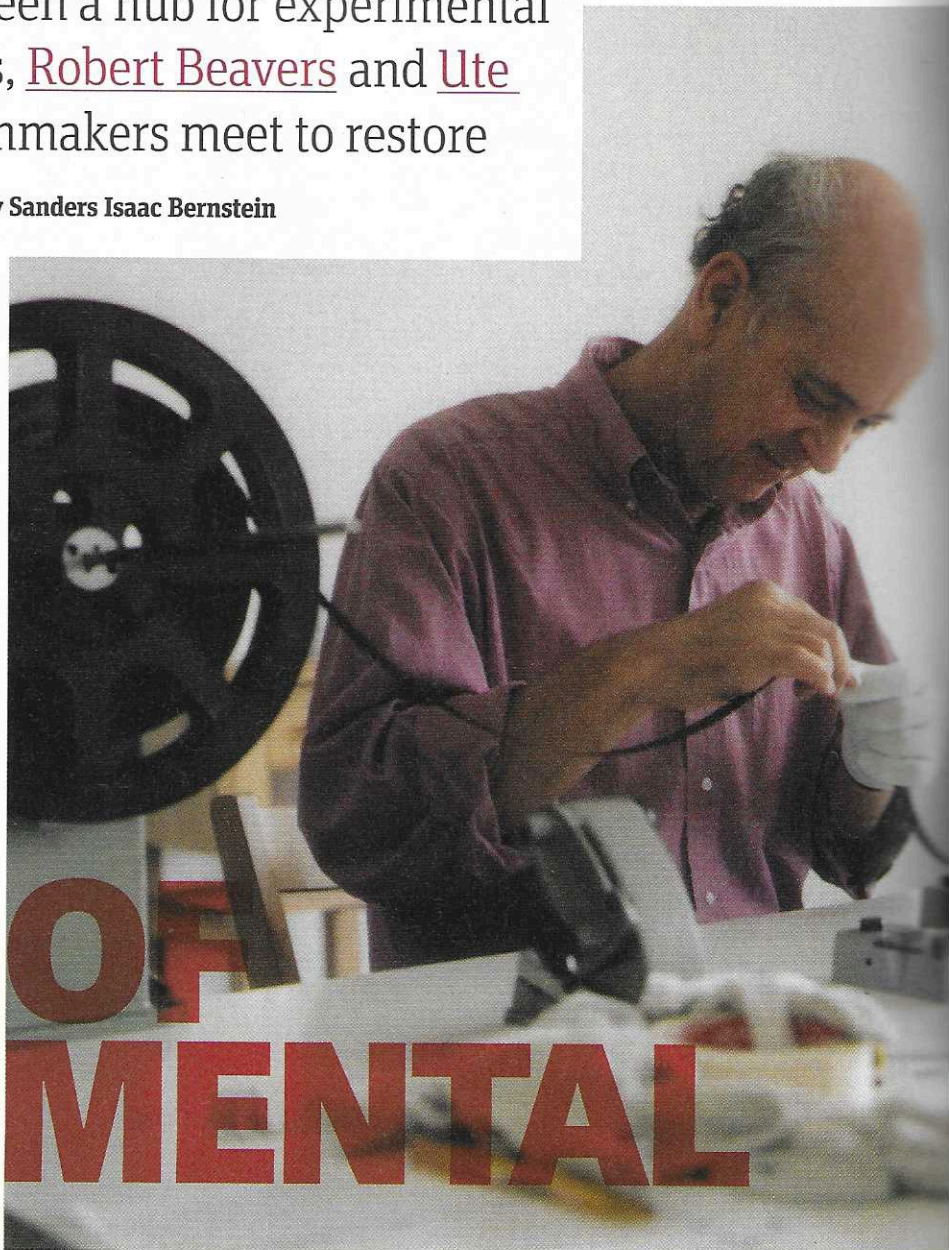


For decades now, Berlin has been a hub for experimental film. Now the scene's veterans, Robert Beavers and Ute Aurand, and young 16mm filmmakers meet to restore old negatives in their studio. *By Sanders Isaac Bernstein*

HERMITS, ANARCHISTS AND AESTHETES

THE FACES OF EXPERIMENTAL FILM



In February, when massive crowds flock to the Berlinale's cinemas to sit before the big screen, a handful of filmmakers from Berlin and beyond will spend their days arduously bent over an editing table examining 16mm film negatives. For three weeks, at the Wilmersdorf studio belonging to experimental filmmaking couple Robert Beavers and Ute Aurand, volunteers will inspect the glue of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of film splices. Working on a section of a film composed of 20,000 frames, they will check each frame's bonding no fewer than six times to confirm it can endure printing and projection; if it can't, they'll scrape it off and re-glue. This committed group will be working on a project that's been in process for

nearly two decades: the restoration of *Eniaiois*, the 80-hour-long magnum opus of Gregory Markopoulos, an important figure in the history of experimental film, and Beavers' late partner in art and life.

By the time he died, Markopoulos had recut his work into this behemoth, but the adhesive he used has since decomposed – part of why the restoration process is so tedious. This collective effort exemplifies the devotion to film and personal connections that sustain the experimental film community in Berlin. The Wilmersdorf repair is an intermittent ritual, but the regular screening of the restored film cycles – shown in 10-hour increments on the lush, tree-enclosed tract of land in Greece's Arcadia that Beavers and Markopoulos bought and named Temenos, a Greek word meaning “sacred grove” – have happened every four years since 2004, save for a pandemic-related delay. These screenings have grown into a kind of shared pilgrimage, as

Beavers, Aurand and 200-odd fellow film devotees all decamp to the remote site that is their film sanctuary.

The various filmmakers who gather at the studio, and those who travel to Arcadia, are all united by a commitment to avant-garde film. Operating on the fringes of both the film and art worlds, and essentially excluded from the marketplace, they see filmmaking as a form of personal expression. But it is also a source of community, one that has flourished in Berlin around Beavers and Aurand – and in memory of Markopoulos.

ORANGES AND HERITAGE

“I don’t know if this, maybe, seems a little dry,” worries Beavers in a measured tone. The visionary filmmaker is concerned about the juiciness of the orange he has just cut open, interrupting his exposition of Berlin’s experimental filmmaking scene as he sits in his studio in Sigmaringer Straße. Like a farmer cultivating heritage citrus, Beavers, 74, makes his films much the way he always has – at least since 1966, when he created *Spiracle* as a 16-year-old working odd jobs in New York City. “I have stayed analog with the image,” he explains. “I also work with a work print. This is a very conservative position: there are many younger film artists who film on film and then have it

scanned and edit it digitally. I’m editing it analog also.”

Born in Massachusetts in 1949, Beavers left the US for Europe in 1967, before finishing high school. There, he and Markopoulos – who would be Beavers’ partner until passing away in 1992 – led a peripatetic life together, moving between temporary lodgings and funnelling all their money into films. In the 1970s, they largely stopped showing their work and began focusing on the dream of Temenos. This was to be a place free from commercial incentives – a sanctuary for screening their films. They selected a site near the birthplace of Markopoulos’s father for this “sacred grove” – and, from 1980 to 1986, screened work there.

After Markopolous died, Beavers settled in Switzerland until 2003, establishing a foundation to care for Markopoulos’s work. Temenos soon took on added meaning, now representing the ongoing project of restoring and screening Markopoulos’s masterwork in addition to the location and vision.

Save for occasional screenings in the nineties, it was not until recently that Beavers has shown the films he has worked on his entire life more widely. In 2005, at New York’s Whitney Museum, he unveiled his cycle, *My Hand Outstretched*, encompassing all his films from 1967 to 2002. Beavers’ work has since been shown across Europe and the US, including at the Berlinale, London’s Tate Modern and the Austrian Film Museum in Vienna.

“The big museums – the art world, basically – have failed with experimental cinema.”



Robert Beavers

INTIMATE DIALOGUES

It was just before this renaissance that Ute Aurand encountered Beavers – and eventually brought him to Berlin. In 1993, Aurand saw Beavers’ film, *The Stoas*. It made a powerful impression. Six years later, she asked him to show his work at her film series *Filmsamstag* (“film saturday”), a collaboration that began in 1997 and was held monthly at Babylon. Beavers accepted, attending screenings regularly until the series ended in 2004. In 2011, he moved to Berlin – and in with Aurand.

Aurand, 65, has been making experimental films for over 40 years, ever since leaving Frankfurt am Main for film school in West Berlin. She has a profoundly personal relationship with cinema. “When you see these kinds of films,” she says, contrasting the experimental films she makes against narrative cinema’s spectacle, “you never forget the filmmaker behind the films.” The summer before she entered the Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin (DFFB) in 1979, she experienced Jonas Mekas’s classic experimental film *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972) as an “unforgettable” revelation. “Intimate and almost private”, she wrote in an autobiographical essay called *How I Began to Film*, “while at the same time, Mekas is

speaking to the entire world.” Yet Mekas’s kind of filmmaking was not political enough for many of Aurand’s fellow film students. “In Germany, they didn’t like the New American Cinema so much,” she explains. “In my generation, this was considered too subjective, too narcissistic, too self-reflective.”

Undeterred by the resistance to this kind of filmmaking, Aurand bought a Bolex camera and an editing console when she graduated film school in 1985. She dedicated herself to the experimental films she had been making since 1981 – and for which she was already receiving awards. “If people ask me, I say, ‘Yeah, I’m an experimental

filmmaker’,” Aurand says, “but I’m not experimental in the way of dealing with the medium itself, manipulating the stock.” Rather, Aurand’s experimentation emerges through her personal vision: the rhythm of her editing, her choice of shots and her tendency toward improvisation.

In Aurand’s filmmaking, her friendships have often provided her subjects, as in *Renate* (2021), a portrait of the 88-year-old Berlin filmmaker Renate Sami. Friendship has also provided the basis for her collaborations, such as her lauded anthology film *Kleine Blumen, kleine Blätter* (1995), which involved eleven different contributors – several of whom were Aurand’s untrained friends and family. “One is always in dialogue,” she says. “Every creative expression is one you give to the world outside. Even a thought is reaching out.”

BERLIN VISION

It was, in part, the promise of community that lured Beavers from Zurich to Berlin. He credits *Filmsamstag* in particular for the move. “I thought it worked,” he says. “They were really outsiders. It was like a group of painters in Paris in the 19th century.”

Aurand has long been heavily involved in Berlin’s experimental film scene. Over the past thirty years, she has organised two other essential experimental film series in Berlin: *Filmarbeiterinnen-Abend* (“female filmmaker night”) and *Sie zum Beispiel* (“her, for example”), both dedicated to showing the work of female filmmakers in the early 1990s. “I started showing films when I realised I couldn’t see the films I was interested in,” she recalls. “I was more or less forced to start.”

Today, Aurand’s involvement takes other forms. In 2015, she founded a workshop at the DFFB that teaches students her kind of filmmaking. It provides them with access to Bolex cameras and 16mm film, making analog

“Every creative expression is one you give to the world outside. Even a thought is reaching out.”

affordable: a Bolex camera costs hundreds of euros, as does the editing table. And a roll of film, each of which can record 3 minutes of shooting, costs at least €110.

Berlin might not be an ideal environment for experimental filmmaking, Aurand reflects, lacking any serious top-down support, but it still helps “by giving the space, by giving the peace and quiet to work, to meet other people who come through the city”, she says. “It is possible to make action, but one has to do it by oneself.” Aurand mentions the LaborBerlin filmmaker’s collective in Gesundbrunnen as one of the other hubs: “In Berlin, we have many parallel universes, we have many people doing different things.”

Arguably, Berlin’s experimental film world does indeed have a centre – the restoration work of the Temenos project. “If something unites some of them, especially the younger generation,” says Volker Pantenburg, Professor of Film at the University of Zurich, about Berlin’s filmmakers, “it is the shared mission of preserving and projecting Markopoulos’s monumental *Eniaios* cycle in the Temenos events.”

COTERIE AND COMMUNITY

With the Temenos project, Beavers cultivates a community as well as Markopoulos’s legacy. Through the restoration of *Eniaios* and the screenings in Greece – the most recent of which took place last summer – Beavers is, like Aurand, developing a new generation’s interest in 16mm filmmaking. “His decision to manifest his late partner’s vision via the restoration work began to produce a community,” says Rebekah Rutkoff, an academic whose forthcoming book is about Beavers. “It was in doing that, and in showing the work again, that he had young filmmakers approaching him and saying, ‘Can I help with this?’”

The way to Temenos has been different for each of the young filmmakers who got involved. Eva Claus, 30,

a Brussels-based filmmaker, came across Beavers when she was at Vienna’s Friedl Kubiela Film School. Melina Pafundi, 35, an Argentine filmmaker living in Berlin, was invited to work on the restoration by Beavers at a mutual friend’s birthday. Ewelina Rosinska, 35, came to work on Temenos by way of Aurand, who taught her at the DFFB.

Josef Grassl, 24, also found the project through Aurand. Captivated by an interview of her on YouTube, he decided to get in touch. “I emailed her asking if I could be her assistant, not having any kind of experience,” he says. “And she was, like, ‘No. I’m Ute Aurand. I work alone.’” Still, Aurand invited him to meet and, intrigued by his digital films, introduced him to Beavers – who, in turn, involved him in the Temenos project.

Beavers speaks of these 16mm filmmakers as a “coterie”, one he describes as “a little utopian and maybe a little suspicious of the mix of academia and politics in relation to art”. He continues, “That makes us a real minority here, because Berlin with its history leans more in the direction of some strong ethical-political filmmaking – whereas we are more hermits and anarchists and aesthetes.” The passion of the coterie stands against the art’s neglect. “Big museums – the art world, basically – have failed with experimental cinema,” Beavers says.

Money might be short, but for the moment, Berlin’s 16mm experimental filmmakers are strong in spirit. “It’s sad,” Grassl says of the financial situation, “but I think a lot of good things come from this. It’s a hobby for everyone because you cannot make it your profession. It’s so passionate because otherwise you wouldn’t do it. Within this small, isolated world, you find many passionate people who see themselves as the audience and as creators.” ■

Best Of experimental

➔ Robert Beavers’ film playlist

Chumlum by Ron Rice (1964) 26 minutes

Gammelion by Gregory Markopoulos (1968) 55 minutes

Valentin de las Sierras by Bruce Baillie (1967) 10 minutes

Noblesse Oblige by Warren Sonbert (1981) 25 minutes

A Return by James Edmonds (2018) 6 minutes

For Dan by Luke Fowler (2021) 12 minutes

➔ Ute Aurand’s film playlist

Portrait of Ga by Margaret Tait (1952) 5 minutes

Notebook by Marie Menken (1963) 10 minutes

Erde im Mund (Earth in the Mouth) by Ewelina Rosinska (2022) 20 minutes

Puchuncavi by Jeannette Muñoz (2014) ongoing

Maya Deren: all her films!

Reminiscences From A Journey To Lithuania by Jonas Mekas (1972) 88 minutes

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