



Distirak#6

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Flores y patos en la superficie

"Flores y patos en la superficie," a commentary from the sixth session of Kinu with Ute Aurand (Germany, 1957), filmmaker and programmer since the 1980s.

The meeting took place first in Azkuna Zentroa's Golem Cinemas for the 16mm screening of two of her films and subsequently in the Atoi space for the viewing and discussion of many other films, including those of some of her key works. In her films, Aurand explores the technical possibilities of camera editing. From a manifest rejection of all kinds of narrative based on plot, she portrays her most immediate reality by composing a series of images where the stimulus is not communication but the enthusiasm and enjoyment of shooting a film. The following commentary will try to approach a way of working that, moving away from the storyline, proposes combining the pleasure of recording with the gift of seeing.

How does one make a form? This is how an interview begins¹ between Renate Sami and Ute Aurand. They are both filmmakers and film cycles programmers since the eighties and often work together, as well as with other filmmakers such as Ulrike Pfeiffer, Jeannette Muñoz, Helga Fanderl or Margaret Tait.

Aurand herself "conceives her films in the tradition of the filmed diary and portrait"², constructing sequences that explore the possibilities of the film medium, experimenting with the plastic and rhythmic faculties of the moving image through camera editing and the editing table.

¹**Open City Documentary Festival** Ute Aurand and Renate Sami in Conversation [Online].- June 2021. – [https://opencitylondon.com/news/ute-aurand-and-renate-sami-in-conversation].

² **Aurand, Ute** UNA CÁMARA PROPIA. PORTRAITS AND FILM DIARIES OF UTE AURAND, MARGARET TAIT AND MARIE MENKEN. [Interview]. February 6, 2014.- Interview from the film "Etats Generaux du Film Documentaire" (2013), section "Fragment d'une oeuvre" : p. 1.

In a conversation between Ute Aurand, Jeannette Muñoz and Helga Fanderl³, about the publication of the book *Meditaciones sobre el presente* (Festival Punto de Vista, 2020)⁴, they highlight their anti-narrative position as filmmakers and the rejection they feel when creating the storyline in their film proposals. A clear example of this is the film *Zu Hause* (Aurand, 1998),⁵ shot in 16mm, where the image is made from the silhouette and shadow generated by Aurand herself when manipulating her Bolex camera in the kitchen of her house (Image 1). The film consists of a technical narrative that places the formal elements at the center of the plot.



Image 1⁶

In Aurand's work it is easy to recognize the search for an image as a direct result of the enjoyment of the recording itself. Sometimes, the motifs on which she experiments with the capture of light and the almost musical rhythm are objects or situations as usual as finding a building under construction and making the decision to document the process of its construction for several years⁷. Usually, rather than showing elements or situations on camera, what she does is use them as a background for experimenting with the image from the opening and closing of the diaphragm, lenses, colour and focus of motifs, placing her real object of interest in focus: cinema. In other occasions, the figures on which she experiments are not as identifiable as buildings, plants or landscapes, but forms in which the figurative relationship begins to be less recognizable: in the portrait made to Margaret Tait, *Glimpses From A Visit to Orkney in Summer 1995*, (2020)⁸, for example, there is a moment in the film with a sequence of mauve colors and pinkish

³**Festival punto de vista YT** Ute Aurand - Helga Fanderl - Jeannette Muñoz - Renate Sami - Retrospectiva [Online].- March 4, 2020. – [<https://youtu.be/jXNZLL1rU9k>].

⁴**Punto de Vista - International Documentary Film Festival of Navarra** *Meditaciones sobre el presente*: Ute Aurand, Helga Fanderl, Jeannette Muñoz, Renate Sami [Book] / ed. Ortega Garbiñe and Palacios Cruz María. - Navarra : NICDO SL, 2020. – Punto de Vista Collection, No. 14.

⁵**Aurand, Ute** *Zu Hause* [16mm] = At Home.- 1998.

⁶ Film frame from the film *Zu Hause* (Aurand, 1998) – [http://www.uteaurand.de/filme/zu_hause.php].

⁷**Aurand, Ute** *In die Erde gebaut* [16mm (S)] = Building Under Ground.- Zurich's Museum Rietberg : Arsenal Distribution, 2008.

⁸ **Aurand, Ute** *Glimpses From A Visit to Orkney in Summer 1995* [16mm (S)] / int. Tait, Margaret. - Ute Aurand Filmproduktion, 2020.

gradients obtained by shooting without lens and out of focus, thus removing any direct figurative reference.

Tait, on the other hand, in her film *Colour Poems* (1974)⁹, and in a similar experimentation with the medium, intertwines a series of documentary images with an accelerated animation sequence that remains in the tension of a figure that does not fully appear and that, however, we identify as a form.

Glimpses From A Visit to Orkney in Summer 1995 and *Colour Poems* seem to share the combination of elements more linked to figurative representation of others without mimetic equivalence. Thus, the sequences are built on the tension between the figures and their absent referents, so that the narrative possibilities do not necessarily focus on a storyline, but in obtaining many that give rise to a form.

In a letter to Ute Aurand in 1995, Helga Fanderl wrote:

You should not be discouraged if your passion and enthusiasm are met with defensive reactions that are more prudent and "sleepy". It is already quite difficult to gain the attention and understanding of others without 'protective support', that is, without others having opened the way before (critics, institutions, publicity) and, especially, when it comes to very personal perceptions and forms of expression. "Flowers and poetry"?! It is problematic for many people. When I was preparing a programme for the event on 8 December, I dared for the first time to compose a completely lyrical part and then a second part of 'action'. And I had the feeling that this was the first time that a programme had been so harmonious. Before, however, I wanted to count on someone else's vision and opinion, so I asked Inkkrit, a painter friend I could expect a sincere opinion from, to watch the movies. The lyrical part irritated her: too many flowers, too many ducks on the surface of the water and the butterflies in the "flowers" were also too much for her. Those feelings cannot be ignored; we need to take them into account. And I think the only way to keep the "flowers" is to create tensions and contrasts. However, I let myself be convinced by Inkkrit's reaction and, to my chagrin, I said goodbye to my editing and rebuilt the programme, leaving the flowers in *Weybridge*, but keeping the programme in two parts, lyrical and action, only less "flowery." And it went well. The purely lyrical was also accepted and, as far as I could see, there was no hostility towards it¹⁰.

⁹ Tait, Margaret *Colour Poems* [16mm]. - Ancona Films, 1974.

¹⁰ Punto de Vista - International Documentary Film Festival of Navarra *Meditaciones sobre el presente: Ute Aurand, Helga Fanderl, Jeannette Muñoz, Renate Sami* [Book] / ed. Ortega Garbiñe and Palacios Cruz María. - Navarra : NICDO SL, 2020. – Punto de Vista Collection, No. 14. p. 37

I confess that, on occasions, I too have felt a similar irritation. Too many flowers and ducks on the surface? "Flowers and poetry"?! In literature, lyrical is conventionally defined as the manifestation of deep feelings and emotions linked to poetic expression. However, it seems to me that it was Viktor Shklovski who was the first to separate *prose cinema from poetic cinema*, the latter being what would advocate a radical abandonment of classical narrative and mimetic pretensions to offer a new look at the things of this world¹¹." The so-called lyrical or poetic cinema would be placed within film experimentation that would not necessarily attend to the motives and to the plot or expressive narrative, but to the perceptual event of construction of meaning from the union of two independent images through the montage.

Without any ambition to find an answer to *what makes a verbal message a work of art*¹² - or in this case, what makes everyday life extraordinary - I think it is interesting to pay attention to that almost generalized feeling of irritability caused by an apparent excess of "flowers and ducks on the surface" that sometimes offers us cinema or video, and that I intuitively relate not to a rejection of the lyrical, but, precisely, to the separation between the lyrical and the action, as if the motif and its movement, the way of form and content, could be divisible. I imagine that what led Fanderl to modify her programme is not based, precisely and unfortunately, on how these seemingly overly lyrical films were shot, but on the cultural significance of the flowery.

At this point, it is interesting to bring to the discussion the considerations on montage in cinema from Eisenstein and his subsequent readings. With the help of a tale by Ambrose Bierce (*Fantastic Fables*, 1899) and an anecdote about the comedian Givochini in Russian theater, Eisenstein explains the problem of placing the cinematographic object in the legible consequences of the montage through the choice of motifs, instead of in the perceptual fact that enables these narrative unions, the so called irrepresentables:

The Inconsolable Widow (1899):

**Una mujer con manto de viuda estaba llorando sobre una tumba.
"Consuélese usted, señora", dijo un forastero compasivo. "La misericordia del cielo es infinita. En algún sitio habrá otro hombre, aparte de su marido, con quien usted pueda aún ser feliz".
"Había", sollozó, "había, pero ésta es su tumba:" 3**

¹¹Perez Bowie, José Antonio Notas sobre cine lírico. Un intento de tipología [Book section] // II Proceedings of the International Congress of Contemporary Spanish Literature and Culture. Diálogos transatlánticos/ auth. book Macciuc Raquel. - [s.l.] : Centro de Estudios de Teoría y Crítica Literaria, 2011. - Vol. 3: p. 4.

¹²Jakobson, Roman Linguistics and Poetics [Online] // Texts Online.- 1981. - [https://www.textosenlinea.com.ar/academicos/Jakobson%20-%20Linguistica%20y%20poetica.pdf].

And Eisenstein says: "The whole effect of this story is built on the fact that the tomb and the mourning woman lead us to infer, by an established convention, that it is a widow crying to her husband, when in reality the man for whom she cries is her lover. The woman (...) is a representation; her mourning clothes, another one. That is, both are *objectively representable*¹³. But "a widow", arising from a juxtaposition of the two representations, is objectively irrepresentable; it is a new idea, a new concept"¹⁴.

Without trying to relegate the universality of certain copulative unions such as those found in hieroglyphics¹⁵ or riddles¹⁶, Eisenstein refers to illation in cinema as one of the causes of the "impairment of the montage"¹⁷, as one of the reasons why cinema ceases to be a plastic exercise and experimentation with the union, to become the narrative technique of the unrepresentable: war, love, a widow, or a portrait from "flowers and ducks on the surface".

I do not think that being the narrative technique of the unrepresentable is a reason for rejection. On the contrary, it is extraordinary. What I do believe, or what I find hard to believe, is that cinema bases its efforts on representation from the cultural significance of the motifs - flowery or not - that it employs in its films. On the contrary, I think that the extraordinary thing about the perceptual event for the construction of meaning through the assembly and union of two independent images lies precisely in the

¹³It would be interesting to add a small note in relation to Eisenstein's comment where he states that, like mourning clothes, a woman can be *objectively representable*. It is true that, as we say, Eisenstein uses the story of Ambrosi Bierce together with another anecdote to explain a concrete concept related to montage in cinema. Here it also serves us insofar as we are trying to define a method of constructing images far from the storyline as an objective in the cinematographic work. However, it is worth highlighting that, by chance, I have recently heard that it is possible that Bierce was very sexist. That's why I think it's fair to add these two definitions — among others that we find in the book *The Cynic's Word Book* (1906)— [<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/43951/43951-h/43951-h.htm>] later known as *The Devil's Dictionary* [https://hmgong.es/wiki/The_Devil%27s_Dictionary]—, where we find great statements such as the following: *Woman would be more charming if one could fall into her arms without falling into her hands; (BEAUTY, n. The power by which a woman charms a lover and terrifies a husband)*. From here we could begin to define a positioning from which someone can come to affirm without complexes that a woman is objectively representable. In any case, and although of doubtful morals or simply of bad taste, this dictionary of the devil also serves to approach a way of building an image that also complies with what Eisenstein established by studying the hieroglyph and the bases of humour from a copula joining meaning; although in this case, rather than a hieroglyph, it would be a joke, as I say, of bad taste.

¹⁴**Eisestein, Sergéi** *El Sentido del Cine* [Book].- Cordoba: Argentina Editores S.A., 1974. - From the original "The Film Sense" Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., New York, 1942: p. 16.

¹⁵**Eisenstein, Sergéi** *La Forma del Cine* [Book] / ed. Leyda Jay. - Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, S.A., 1999. - From the original "Film Form", 1949, Harcourt brace Javanovich, Inc.: p. 34.

¹⁶*Ibid.*: pp. 18-19.

¹⁷*Ibid.*: p. 19.

appearance of an irrepresentable from that union, that is, from the action that moves its motifs on screen.

When we saw the film *At Land* by Maya Deren (1944)¹⁸, the first images of the beach made me think of how many times we have seen the sea represented in cinema, in painting, and if it is possible today to represent it without alluding to other previous representations. I remembered Claudia Rebeca Lorenzo's *Mar de Plata*¹⁹, which is almost more sea than sea even though it is hot asphalt, and I realize that more than water or soil, it is the representation of a person who has decided not to stop recording. And then I wonder if we can reach the sea through representation, and I feel that we can't; I feel that the motive or the object in scene can never be attainable at a level of representation, except for an action that brings it to the world.

Buñuel tells us in his autobiography²⁰ the experiences of the inhabitants of Zaragoza when the first film screenings arrived in the city, back in 1914. A narrator had to systematically tell a story so that the audience would not run out of the room thinking that they were the ones who were going to be shot by a revolver the size of a church bell. The narrator, accompanied by the pianist, had to separate one reality from another, generating, on the one hand, the miracle of representation through the montage, but at the same time, making all experimental logic disappear from the proposals of its authors. Quite the contrary to what Vertov proposed in *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) where, without a script and without the help of intertitles, he pursues "creating an absolute and universal cinematic language completely free of theatrical or literary language²¹," a response to the gaze contracted by the hegemonic excess of the influences of other disciplines, which in his opinion, made cinema lose its autonomy as an experimental practice of moving images.

But it is not necessary to go back to the beginning of the last century to attend discussions about the taxonomic separation between action and lyrics²². Directors who

¹⁸ **Deren, Maya** *At Land* [16mm] / int. Deren, Maya; Cage, John [and others]. - Maya Deren Experimental Films, 1944.

¹⁹ **Lorenzo, Claudia Rebeca** *Mar de plata* [<https://vimeo.com/165780679>].

²⁰ **Buñuel, Luis** *Mi último suspiro* [Book]. - [s.l.] : Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial, 2016. - From the original "Mon dernier soupir" 1982. Éditions Robert Laffont, S.A., Paris. : p. 43-44.

²¹ **Vertov, Dziga** *Chelovek's kino-apparatom = The Man with a Movie Camera.*- VUFKU, 1929 : min. 00:01:14 : "*Fragmento del Diario de un Operador Cinematográfico. Interesting for viewers: The film you are going to watch is an essay on cinematic diffusion of visual experiments. WITHOUT RESORTING TO INTERTITLES (the film has no intertitles), WITHOUT RESORTING TO A SCRIPT (the film has no script), WITHOUT RESORTING TO THEATRICALITY (the film has neither sets nor actors), this experimental work aims to create an absolute and universal cinematic language completely free of theatrical or literary language.*"

²² **Vertov, Dziga** *Del Cine-Ojo al Radio-Ojo* (Extract from ABC de los kinoks) [Book section]. - Online text: [<https://leondelarosa.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/del-cine-ojo-al-radio-ojo-dziga-vertov.pdf>].

began working from the second avant-garde openly claimed the place that technique should occupy in the narrative, creating plots parallel to those that can be interpreted from more orthodox codes, such as *introduction-climax-resolution*, where things are the very gesture of showing them. Bresson, Fassbinder, Tarkovski, Resnais, Herzog, or Deren herself, are a clear example of this. And, of course, Godard, an author whom Aurand herself would refer to as someone whom she did not admire excessively, but in whom she recognized something extraordinary: *"For many in the DFFB Jean Luc-Godard was a hero. But not me. But one night, at the entrance of the DFFB, I heard music coming out of an editing room and at that very moment I had the impression that something totally different was happening there. It was very normal classical music, but what triggered as film music is still a feeling of unforgettable freedom. I knocked on the door. Someone was watching Le Mépris (The Contempt) on an editing table"*²³.

Returning to Eisenstein and the possibility of the extraordinary, there is an anecdote about Vasili Ignatyevich Givochini that interests me especially in relation to the separation between motivation and action:

Givochini, el famoso comediante del Teatro Malyi, fue obligado en una ocasión a sustituir a última hora al popular bajo moscovita, Lavrov, en la ópera *The amorous Bayaderka*. Pero Givochini no tenía buena voz. Sus amigos sacudieron la cabeza simpatizando con él: "¿Cómo vas a cantar el papel, Vasili Ignatyevich?" Givochini no se mostraba desanimado. Con expresión feliz, dijo: "Las notas que no alcance con la voz, las mostraré con las manos."²⁴

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I do not know if the singing technique, somewhat poor, by the happy Ignatyevich and his hands influenced later theatrical performances or if they were stylistic. In any case, I think it is in the exploration of the possibilities of the medium and from certain technical limits (the voice) when one develops what they can, their resources (one's hands), escaping what at a given moment gave meaning to those motives (Lavrov), and not the other way around.

I understand that the reference to lyrical cinema, as opposed to action cinema, in Fanderl's letter refers to a problem that has more to do with the reading of images and

²³**Punto de Vista - International Documentary Film Festival of Navarra** Meditaciones sobre el presente: Ute Aurand, Helga Fanderl, Jeannette Muñoz, Renate Sami [Book] / ed. Ortega Garbiñe and Palacios Cruz María. - Navarra : NICDO S.L., 2020. – Colección Punto de Vista, nº 14: p. 13.

²⁴**Eisenstein, Sergei** La Forma del Cine [Book] / ed. Leyda Jay. - Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, S.A., 1999. - From the original "Film Form", 1949, Harcourt brace Javanovich, Inc.: p. 34.

motifs associated with one type of argument or another, than with the practice of recording itself. Recording is always action and movement. Placing cinematographic work in one place or another depending on the figures that appear as a background, instead of the type of construction of moving images that are experienced in the montage itself, reminds me of an underlying problem in practically all approaches to art via the theories of visual culture, that is, the problem of interpretation. Above all, because we must not forget that expression is not free, and technique influences narration. Therefore, I think that the most interesting thing in Aurand's work are not the floral, intimate or affective motifs that, according to the reviews I have been able to read, characterize her work; but, precisely, the way in which she approaches her most immediate reality and the type of image that results from it. Obviously, we could make an interpretative reading from the elements that she decides to record or the situations in which she immerses herself to get a type of image, and conclude what I would say is a self-portrait rather than a portrait of her environment. But these considerations, which would place the significance of the motif above the construction of the form, fall into the risk of forgetting that art has the ability to work with the materiality of signs before the solidification of their meanings, and that its possibility does not lie in the ability to do something legible, but in "revealing the complex potential to signify the sign itself."²⁵ As far as I know, cinema does not build narratives with flowers, but by moving the flowers.

Surely they have been written and said, but I do not know any interpretative readings about the works of my nearest environment. I wonder what they will say about *HB* by Lorea Alfaro²⁶, *Ensueño de Amor* by Elena Aitzkoa²⁷, the loop clips by Ignacio Sáez²⁸, the boot with Rihanna in the background in image 29**²⁹, *Chulo* by Claudia Rebeca Lorenzo³⁰ or the new version of *Lay all your love on me* by Elbis Rever³¹. I am not against

²⁵**Mendizabal, Asier** Fire and/or Smoke [Book].- London : Koenig Books, 2016 : p. 9: "*The sign is, above all else, in its materiality, a signifier. The signifier has no fixed equivalence with its meaning. The signifier "fire" does not have the same significance in a forest fire in Galicia, at a cash point in Bilbao, with a car in Neuilly-sur-Seine or in Los Angeles shopping mall. Ideology fixes that signifying network at a concrete point with certain determined meanings, solidifying the process of symbolization in one of many possible options. Art has the advantage of working with the materiality of signs before the solidification of meaning. It is not therefore the task of art to make anything understood in the register of fixed equivalence, but to avail itself of the potential of the complexity of the sign*".

²⁶**Alfaro, Lorea** PRO ETO Presentación Lorea Alfaro / Producciones de arte feminista [Online].- Arteleku, July 24, 2013. – [https://vimeo.com/77581516] : min. 00:45:45.

²⁷**Aitzkoa, Elena** Ensueño de Amor / int. Aitzkoa, Elena; Vegas, Natalia.

²⁸**Prego, Sergio** Ignacio Sáez - Albatross [Online]. - Et Hall, 2016. – [http://www.ethall.net].

²⁹**Torre, Mar** Mar Torre (Image 29**). MEETINGS WITH ARTISTS 2016. [Online].- Fundación Bilbaoarte Fundazioa, 2016. - [https://vimeo.com/202734910].

³⁰**Lorenzo, Claudia Rebeca** Chulo [https://vimeo.com/221117300].

³¹**Elbis Rever** Lay all your love on me - ABBA (Elbis Rever cover) [Online]. – [https://soundcloud.com/user-103275402/lay-all-your-love-on-me-abba-elbis-rever-cover].

interpretation, but I know it says more about who interprets than what is being interpreted. And because *art has the ability to show the sign before the solidification of its meanings*, it wasn't hard for me to understand Ute when she said that she does not like to be told what she has to feel. She doesn't force us to feel anything with her work, she doesn't direct our feelings; it's just a way to share her enthusiasm.

Of all the films we saw in the workshop with Aurand I most like *Envío 30, for Claudio Maturana* by Jeannette Muñoz³², a film by correspondence³³ that everyone would like to receive as a gift, at least once in their life.

³² **Muñoz, Jeannette** ENVÍO 30 para Claudio Maturana G., El Cortijo, Santiago de Chile 2017 [16mm (S)]. – 2017.

³³ **Muñoz, Jeannette** SUBMISSIONS [Online]. – [<http://jeannettemunozcandia2.blogspot.com/2011/04/envios-are-moments-in-photography-and.html>].

Other films that we could see at the meeting-workshop:

Aurand, Ute Four Diamonds [16mm]. – 2016.

Aurand, Ute Schweigend ins Gespräch vertieft [16mm/digital] = Deeply Absorbed in Silent Conversations.- Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek, 1981.

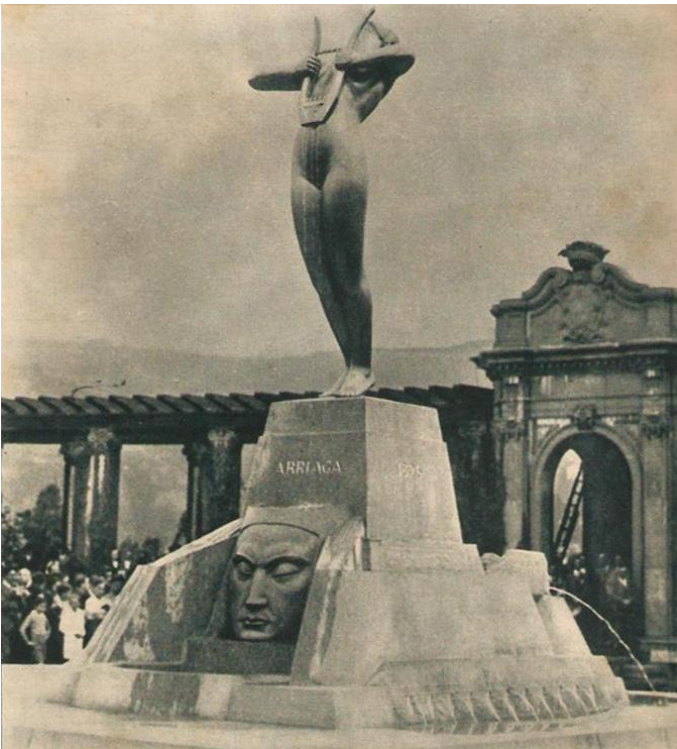
Mekas, Jonas Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania [16mm].- Vaughan Films, 1972.

Aurand, Ute; Pfeiffer, Ulrike OH! Die 4 Jahreszeiten [16mm] = OH! The Four Seasons / int. Pfeiffer, Ulrike; Aurand, Ute. - Arsenal Distribution, 1986-88.

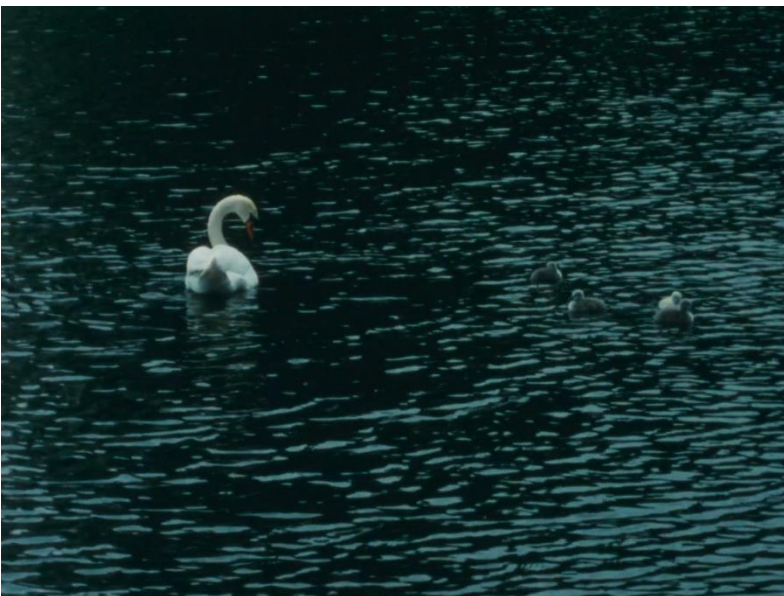
Aurand, Ute Kopfüber im Geäst [16mm (S)] = Hanging Upside down in the Branches.- Arsenal Distribution, 2009.

Beavers, Robert Listening to the Space in my Room [16mm].- 2013.

Aurand, Ute Renate [16mm] / int. Sami, Renate. - Ute Aurand Filmproduktion, 2021.



A lyre in the monument to Arriaga by the sculptor Paco Durrio.



A Swan and its Pigeons in Ute Aurand's Renate



AZKUNA ZENTROA
ALHÓNDIGA BILBAO