Cocniding with the retrospective film series East Meets West: The Films of Ulrike Ottinger (streaming at bampfa.org from November 20, 2020, through July 18, 2021), MATRIX 276 is BAMFFA’s first exhibition of Ottinger’s photographic work. The works on view, a broad selection of images made over a period of decades and often in far-flung locations, display Ottinger’s abiding interests in portraiture and landscape. Often, but not always, her photographic work runs parallel to her film projects. As a filmmaker, Ottinger takes on the dual responsibility of director and cinematographer; Ottinger is the eye behind the camera lens. Her visual art excels in the aesthetic quality of image-making, be it still photography or time-based cinematic works. Both media reveal her talent as a cameraperson—her eye for detail, frame composition, color, and light—and her worldview.

The three earliest images in this exhibition are portraits Ottinger made between 1975 and 1980 of fellow artists in Berlin. Tabea Blumenstein, Christoph Eichhorn, and Magdalena Montezuma, all of whom are also known for their work as actors. Oriental Fantasy (1975), picturing Eichhorn in costume, is an expressive example of Ottinger’s interest in transformation and the world of the imaginary. Blumenstein, who poses as the sci-fi character Aleta in a 1976 photograph, was the subject and muse of many portraits Ottinger made during the seventies. She also collaborated extensively with Ottinger on her early films: she was a lead actor as well as the costume and makeup designer for Lassoona & Soane (1975), Madame X: An Absolute Rule (1977), and Tic-A Tic-A: Return (1979). Ottinger made the 1980 photographic series Distortion Studies at the time when Montezuma (known for her roles in the films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Rosa von Praunheim, and Werner Schroeter) played a lead role in Ottinger’s Freak Orlando (1981). These three portraits and the way each uses costumery and character bear a direct connection to Ottinger’s work in the area of narrative cinema.

The other images in this exhibition relate more directly to the documentary impulse in her work. Ottinger’s photographs are at once intimate and direct. The portraits of people she encounters on her travels offer a sense of the subject in dialogue with the photographer—often through the subject’s direct gaze at the camera. This is beautifully expressed in Cowboy with Light Pattern (2004), an image taken in San Antonio, Texas, and inspectors (1987), a striking group composition of five men that Ottinger shot in Huilun in northeastern India. The remarkable sense of engagement is a characteristic quality of her work in both photography and film.

Ottinger’s work as a visual artist is tied to all that she has learned from her travels and studies, from her years spent living in Paris in the 1960s to her European travels and longer journeys to places like China, Mongolia, India, and the Bering Sea region. As a photographer, Ottinger is witness to a world in transition. She documents places and settings that are imbued with a sense of history and distinct cultural customs. This is especially true of the photographs she took in China in 1985 that memorialize an old world and old ways. Her images of China reveal striking moments of a world in transition. She documents places and settings that are imbued with a sense of history and the natural world. It is easy to see why her work is celebrated and, as one gets to know her as an artist, one can’t but be struck by her wisdom, talent, and aesthetic choices as a creative intellect.

Susan Oxtoby
DIRECTOR OF FILM AND SENIOR FILM CURATOR

BAMFFA’s MATRIX 276: EAST MEETS WEST—THE FILMS OF ULRIKE OTTINGER is organized by Susan Oxtoby, Director of Film and Senior Film Curator, with Claire Maltby, Curatorial Assistant. The matrix program is made possible by a generous endowment gift from Phyllis C. Watts and the continued support of the BAMFFA Trustees.

BAMFFA.org/Ottinger

Artist’s Talk
Streaming at bampfa.org/ Ottinger
Biography
Ulrike Ottinger (b. 1942, Konstanz, Germany) lives in Berlin, where she works as a filmmaker, visual artist, and director of theater and opera. From 1962 until 1968, Ottinger lived and worked as an artist in Paris, where she exhibited at the Salon de la Jeune Peinture and elsewhere. She studied etching techniques at the studio of Johnny Friedlaender and attended lectures at the Sorbonne on art history, religious studies, and ethnology with Claude Lévi-Strauss, Louis Althusser, and Pierre Bourdieu. In 1966 she wrote her first screenplay, The Mongolian Double Drawer. Ottinger’s most recent film, Paris Calligrammes (2020), is about this transformative period of her life. She has taken part in major art exhibitions, presenting her photography at the Venice Biennale, Documenta, and the Berlin Biennale, among others. Solo exhibitions of her photographic and cinematic works have been shown at the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam; the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid; and the KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, among others.

Checklist
All works courtesy of the artist.

Inspectors, 1987; digital color print; 31 1/2 × 47 1/4 in.

Mr. Nakataya Bleaches the New Crepe Fabrics, 2011; digital color print from transparency; 19 1/4 × 29 7/8 in.

Oriental Fantasy, 1975; digital black-and-white print from transparency; 25 × 17 1/4 in. (framed).

Distortion Studies, 1980, from Freak Orlando; silver gelatin print; 20 3/8 × 15 1/8 in.


Cowboy with Light Pattern, 2004, from Faces, Found Objects and Rough Riders; silver gelatin print; 36 1/4 × 52 1/2 in.

Stone Sorting in the Riverbed, 1985, from China. The Arts—The People; color print; 33 1/2 × 47 1/4 in.

Table Tennis, 1985, from China. The Arts—The People; digital color print from transparency; 35 × 51 1/4 in.

Guardsmen on the Pushkar Border, 1992; color print from transparency; 39 1/2 × 59 1/2 in.

Odessa Market, 2000, from Southeast Passage; digital color print from transparency; 29 1/2 × 35 1/2 in.

If You Have a White Reindeer, You Do Not Need To Be Afraid of the Deep Snow, 1991, from Tags; color print from transparency; 30 1/2 × 48 1/4 in.

The Dismembering of the Bait, 1982, from Dorian Gray in the Mirror of the Yellow Press; digital color print from transparency; 37 1/2 × 54 3/4 in.

Guardsmen on the Pushkar Border, 1992; color print from transparency; 39 1/2 × 59 1/2 in.

Odessa Market, 2000, from Southeast Passage; digital color print from transparency; 29 1/2 × 35 1/2 in.

Photographer and Ashtoncher in the Old Housing District of Beijing, 1992, from China. The Arts—The People; color print from transparency; 30 1/2 × 48 1/4 in.

The Yurts of the Old Shaman Suren and Her Daughter Bajar, 1991, from Taiga; color print from transparency; 30 1/4 × 44 7/8 in.

Herd of Camels at Altrag Gol, 1991, from Taiga; color print from transparency; 24 3/8 × 36 in. (framed).