



ED HALTER IN CONVERSATION  
WITH PETER HUTTON

*The following discussion occurred on February 18, 2015 at Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, after a screening of 16mm films by Hutton, including his New York Portrait, Chapter 1 (1979), Lodz Symphony (1991-93), and Study of a River (1997). The event took place on the occasion of the exhibition James Benning & Peter Hutton: Nature is a Discipline, curated by myself, which ran at Miguel Abreu from January 24 to March 8, 2015, and included two installations by Hutton, At Sea (2004-07) and Three Landscapes (2013), along with Benning's Tulare Road (2010).*

– Ed Halter

Ed Halter: These are your personal prints. You know, watching them again, in some ways your work – which you made through the seventies and nineties – hearkens back to much older types of cinema. When I watch them, I can't help but think of some of the earliest film artists, like Paul Strand and Joris Ivens, Walter Ruttmann. You even refer to Walter Ruttmann's Berlin: Symphony of a Great City. So I'm curious why those kind of forms spoke to you at that time.

Peter Hutton: I think a lot of what interests me about film is the idea of making records of things you see, you know – kind of collecting records of different experiences, but primarily portraits of places and cities. Through so much work, you realize that things change and there is so much emphasis on the sort of artifice of things, artifice in general, that I think sometimes the beauty of film lies in just recording. As James Agee used to say, "the cruel radiance of what is." Aside from all the artifice, to make records of things. Since I was quite young, I appreciated the kind of records that gave me a window into another time and another place. And also, the older I get the more I realize its kind of timelessness – there's something beautiful about a record that freezes time in a way, yet makes the act of recording valuable. It could be portraits, it could be any number of subjects, but just the idea of keeping records is important to me. And I don't even think of myself as a film maker in the traditional sense, but someone that came into film and appreciated the beauty of film to record things and leave it at that.

EH: Do you think there's a tension there between wanting to capture images that seem timeless but at the same time wanting to fix a certain moment? I mean, "New York Portrait" is interesting because, except for a few markers, we're really unsure what decade of New York it is. It could be the 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s ...

PH: Right.

EH: So I'm curious, when you're selecting images, is there a tension there between a kind of timeless image and the image that's specific to that moment?

PH: Well, I always want to go back in time. So I always want to reference the past rather than the future. And I think that's a function of black and white influencing our perception in terms of what is. There's something interesting about black and white that does tend to take us backward rather than project us forward.

EH: "At Sea" is largely in color. Do you think that informs the sense of temporality in the piece?

PH: Yes. I sort of came into color late in my career, because I was so invested in black and white. Then there were technical issues with black and white. All those films were shot on reversal print stock – reversal film, subsequently reversal print stock. And about, I don't know how many years ago, Kodak stopped making reversal print in the 90s. And I thought, 'Oh shit, this isn't good, you can't make copies of reversal.' You have to understand this is a technical thing, it's never that interesting. If you make prints off the original – which I do – you get a much finer quality. And when they eliminated the film stock, you couldn't make prints off the original anymore. Anyway,

it's technical. It sort of said bye-bye for black and white reversal, so I switched over to black and white negative and then color negative. And I always shoot black and white, because I just like it. It's interesting when I started making films in the sixties, I thought, 'You know, I'll do black and white for a while, sort of get to know it,' then I got addicted to it and I couldn't let it go, it was still so important to me. It's just one of those things you fall into. You fall in love with your material and it's hard to get away from. But color is so interesting. I avoided making color when I was young because it was a lot more expensive. When I started making films the idea was just to shoot, shoot as much as I could. I liked the fact that black and white abstracted reality in an interesting way, since we don't see in black and white. And I stuck with it.

EH: Though you are colorblind, right?

PH: Yeah. [audience laughs] But a lot of people are colorblind, it's not a big deal.

EH: It's interesting – a few years ago, Anthology Film Archives did a brilliant series called 'One-Eyed Auteurs' that was all about cinematographers with only one eye.

PH: We can talk about Cézanne in that regard, or Van Gogh, or a lot of artists that suffered certain impediments that manifest really exultant results. There's an interesting book called 'The Natural History of the Senses' by Diane Ackerman that analyzes a lot of this stuff. She does this very interesting section on different artists – like Cézanne – and talks about the various things happening and not happening in their brains. It contributed to a way of looking and seeing reality that might have been based on impairment. There's something about limitations that I think are good.

EH: Speaking of looking, one part of your biography that's often brought up is your time as a merchant marine on ships, which is really apparent in some of your work, but especially in 'At Sea.' How do you think that informed the way you look at things?

PH: Imagine yourself out on the forepeak of a ship crossing the Pacific, late at night, looking for lights in the distance. One of my jobs as a deckhand was to report to the bridge by ringing a bell indicating how many points off the port and bow or the starboard and bow were lights I perceived, to indicate a ship was coming toward us. This was an old nautical tradition. But night after night for months, looking out into the void of night, I realized I could see things I never knew I could see. I could see stars reflecting on the surface of the ocean, I would see these phosphorescent explosions and phosphorescents under the sea – things I never knew my eyes were capable of. I think mariners, going back to the Vikings, had to rely on their eyes to study everything – the weather, the textures, the sea – to survive. So their eyes were very vital to things. When you spend a long time at sea, your eyes get activated in a really interesting way. It's a world unknown to so many people. You feel like you're almost an astronaut, you're out there looking at things most people haven't had the pleasure of seeing. But a lot of the things one sees can't be recorded on film. It's frustrating. I've seen so many amazing things on the bows of ships at night, and I tell this long story which I won't tell again about sailing into a storm one night, crossing the Indian Ocean, and it's all about darkness. No, actually the moon was out, but then it went behind clouds and got darker and darker. I was astounded by how dark dark could be. It's darker and darker, and I'm like my god, it's even darker. It got colder and the seas kicked up and I eventually went back to the bridge in the ship, then it started getting lighter and the moon came out. Visually, that was the best moment of my life. You can't do that on film.

EH: One thing that this show has brought out is that both you and James Benning have very specific disciplines of looking – which is what he called it. You've known James for many years. I'm curious what you think about the relationship between your works – there are obvious similarities – but is there a way you'd articulate the difference between his discipline of looking and yours?

PH: He was a mathematician and I wasn't. That sums it up.

EH: Is that a pun?

PH: No, that's not a pun. His awareness to time is much more conceptual than mine.

EH: Last night we screened Benning's 'Natural History,' (2014) which is edited to the digits of pi.

PH: There you go.

EH: He definitely brings more a priori elements to bear. It seems that you work outwards from the footage – in the opposite way.

PH: Yeah, I'm responding to a kind of sensuality in what I see. I showed some films at Cal Arts in the seventies, and the audience was mystified because there wasn't a mathematical thing going on. I remember a young woman said to me, 'Where's the math?' I was so depressed after that.

EH: That's also a period – in the mid-seventies coming after structural film. That's when cinema really had its own form of minimalism and conceptualism. Your work would have been out of sync with that at the time.

PH: My work is out of the nineteenth century. A strain of romanticism that's long gone, I think, in terms of my own orientation in experience.

PETER HUTTON  
16mm film stills from AT SEA





PETER HUTTON  
16mm film stills from SKAJAFJORDUR and NY