



## FILM AT REDCAT PRESENTS

### Ulrike Ottinger: *The Korean Wedding Chest*

**Monday Oct 5 | 8:30 pm**

Jack H. Skirball Series

\$9 [students \$7, CalArts \$5]

West Coast Premiere

Germany/South Korea, 2008, 82 min., 35mm

In English and Korean with English subtitles

Acclaimed director Ulrike Ottinger returns to REDCAT with the West Coast Premiere of her new film, *The Korean Wedding Chest*. Last at REDCAT for the sold-out presentation of *Prater* in 2008, the longtime provocateur of the New German Cinema emerged in the 1970s with a series of feminist camp films set amongst the subcultural demimonde of Berlin. In her latest documentary, Ottinger continues the ironic-fabulist vein of such renowned past works as *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* (1989), probing the strange and eccentric encounter of cultures, performative art, mythos and memory.

Mixing ethnography and visually stunning tableaux, Ottinger unpacks the vast symbolic world held in a Korean wedding chest. This “well-stocked miracle” – a key ritual component of Korean marriage ceremonies, which in turn command an industry of its own in today’s Seoul – becomes the starting point for a fascinating excavation of the ancestral stories, traditional and contemporary mores, romantic dreams and Western kitsch that animate the modern Korean bride-and-groom’s rite-of-passage.

Ottinger bookends the film with voiceovers of a charming myth that she’s authored herself. In between she takes us from a visit with a wedding chest-maker who lovingly explains the contents of her trade, to trundling through the streets of Seoul behind a wedding chest hoisted on the back of a young man, and finally lands us smack in the whirlwind of an elaborate wedding in a banquet hall complete with busy photographers and sword-wielding female ritual helpers.

"Even though this carefully packed, filled, and tied-up wooden chest was assembled according to the rules of an honored tradition, it offers a remarkable insight into and overview of modern Korean society. I was inspired to look more closely at the old and new rituals to determine what is old in the new and new in the old. A modern fairytale about the amazing phenomenon of new mega cities emerging everywhere and their contradictory societies caught in the balancing act. Bon voyage into the present." (Ulrike Ottinger)

**In person: Ulrike Ottinger**

### **Film Credits**

Production: Ulrike Ottinger Filmproduktion, Berlin; in cooperation with the International Women's Film Festival Seoul (IWFFIS)  
Producer/Director/Screenwriter: Ulrike Ottinger  
Cinematographer: Ulrike Ottinger, Lee Sunyoung  
Sound Recordist: Lee Wonduk  
Editor: Bettina Blickwede

### **On *The Korean Wedding Chest***

"Centered on the uneasy but fascinating marriage between old and new wedding customs, Ottinger's delicately-observed film is by turns revealing and hilarious." – *Peter Brunette*, The Hollywood Reporter

"*The Korean Wedding Chest* paints a very entertaining portrait of a society that in family matters has preserved surprisingly conservative traditions. One marvels at the beauty of the clothes, the plethora of wondrous rituals, and the staging of perfect moments that are photographed like sculptures. A whole world opens up when the wedding chest, like a 'Pandora's Box,' is opened." – *2009 Berlinale program notes*

### **Excerpt of an Interview with Ulrike Ottinger Conducted by Dorothee Wenner; Berlin, Jan. 2009**

**Q:** *What kind of a narrative or dramaturgical route did you have in mind when you shot this film?*

**A:** It was like this: when the offer came to make this film, I had not yet been in Korea. But I had read a lot about the country and delved deeply into its shamanism, art, music and theater. So one day I arrived in Seoul and took a look at everything. I drove and walked around and looked at everything. And that's exactly how I filmed; at first I didn't have the slightest idea how it would all come together later in the finished film. I collected things with the camera that struck me. That sounds awfully arbitrary, but I have worked a lot in other Asian countries, so some things were familiar and known. Despite

all the differences, there are also many things in common among the Asian cultures. The first thing I noticed in Seoul was that the streets there – like our streets a long time ago – were arranged in terms of the residents' occupations. The second thing that struck me was the great number of shops specializing in weddings. I made that my starting point.... because I find them extremely interesting and revealing. They show so much about a society. At a wedding, every area of societal life is activated: the arts, music, religious ideas, cultural and ritual practices. Add to that the clothing, the food, the phases of a wedding, the preparations and cleanup. When two families join together, usually there are many political and economic interests on both sides. I would even say that one could define various cultures or cultural ideas solely on the basis of weddings. Weddings are a very special kind of challenge for people: they provoke everyone involved to show themselves and thereby to show something about themselves.

*Q: But Seoul is definitely a modern city. How or where in this very urban environment did you discover the traditions and the "old ways?"*

**A:** At first glance, Seoul and its architecture are indeed very modern. In contrast to our cities, where you can often follow the traces of history back to the Middle Ages, the oldest settlements in Seoul are from the 1950s. But there are also these wonderful, very old temples and palaces that seem like islands in this extremely modern and very pragmatic city. They exist in isolation, seemingly without relationship to their immediate surroundings. I tried to develop something out of this discrepancy – because on second glance, Seoul isn't modern at all. That was what was exciting, that was the fascinating challenge in this film: I wanted to show something that is not visible at first glance. Film is ultimately always about making something visible. And so I came up with the weddings, because here I could find the old in the new – and vice versa. Besides, weddings are very present in Seoul. I estimate that in this city of 14 million residents, three million are in the wedding business, directly or indirectly. It's gigantic.

*Q: A crucial area that is given plenty of scope in your film is wedding photography and its staging. What is important in wedding photography?*

**A:** In Korea, as in China and Mongolia, photography is tremendously important. Old, ritual functions are fulfilled in a new way in photography. At a wedding, photos are especially important; every Korean family has at least four huge photo albums that precisely capture all the important stages in their lives. Without these photos, you probably couldn't prove that you were married. It is such a must that you get the impression the entire ceremony is held just for these captured moments. And that gives the images something almost sculptural. Photographing verges on obsession at Korean weddings; you get the impression people have to prove something. I wondered what that could be. For example, there are these extremely important assistants who are always picking at everyone – in the middle of the most ceremonious moments. These assistants act like the assistants in Asian theater who operate the puppets and are not actually seen; only the figures are seen. The assistants are, so to speak, "seen away." For us it is unbelievable, for

example, how the “visible” father of the bride is lifted up by a “seen-away” assistant so that his pants and jacket can be straightened. Perhaps this all happens because the point is not to capture “the whole thing,” but only to produce individual pictures of it. The moment is important, and it has to be perfect. I haven’t yet figured out exactly what is behind this desire for perfection or if that is the only way the ritual can be fulfilled.

**Q:** *The film begins and ends with a fairytale that you wrote yourself and that refers equally to “the old” and “the new.”*

**A:** As text, this fairytale contrasts with the images of train stations and other hyper-modern cityscapes, while its story – which has a lot in common with Siberian, Mongolian, and northern Chinese fairytales, by the way – is oriented toward religious ideas and myths of origin. These ideas are very powerful for people; for Koreans, the family is still the most important thing in life. Of course there are many young people in Korea who want to live differently and with greater freedom, but I think it is very difficult in this country. Many innovations are accepted, but all deviations, sexual or otherwise, must remain within the family. Korea is quite liberal, but the ideas about family are not liberal; at the same time, those ideas form the supreme value system. The family is a very sensitive area within which the greatest possible degree of individuality is made possible, precisely because “cutting oneself off,” turning away from the family, is still considered taboo. That’s why divorces, which of course exist, are often kept secret in Korea. All of this perhaps has to do with very old experiences, for example that earlier it was not possible to exist outside of the family; if you were alone, you were practically sentenced to death. We can’t really claim that we are so far away from such ideas in our country, either. I remember very clearly what dramas played out in the 1950s when, for example, Protestant and Catholic or Jewish and gentile partners wanted to marry.

## Filmography

*The Korean Wedding Chest* (2008)  
*Seoul Women Happiness* (2008, short)  
*Prater* (2007)  
*Twelve Chairs* (2004)  
*Southeast Passage* (2002)  
*Exile Shanghai* (1997)  
*Taiga* (1992)  
*Countdown* (1990)  
*Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia* (1989)  
*Usinimage* (1987, short)  
*Superbia – Pride* (1986, short)  
*China – The Arts – Everyday Life* (1985)  
*The Image of Dorian Gray in the Yellow Press* (1984)  
*Freak Orlando* (1981)  
*Ticket of No Return* (1979)

*Madame X – An Absolute Ruler* (1977)  
*The Enchantment of the Blue Sailors* (1975, short)  
*Laocoon and Sons* (1972, short)  
*Berlin Fever* (1972, short)

Program curated by Bérénice Reynaud and Steve Anker

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