

## Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona CCCB

Montalegre, 5

E – 08001 Barcelona

### Xcèntric

#### **The Beauty of My Island. The Universe of Klaus Lutz**

Friday, 18 March 2016, 7pm

Curators: Celeste Araújo, Oriol Sánchez, Hannes Schüpbach

Coordinators: Gloria Vilches, Miguel Gil

Director of Xcèntric: Carolina López

Credits: The Estate of Klaus Lutz / Rotwand, Zurich

Thanks to: Frank Matter, Sabina Kohler and Bettina Meier-Bickel,

Axel Töpfer/Kinemathek Le Bon Film, Basel

Hall: **Arabia 1+2**, Klaus Lutz, 1991, 2 x 16mm, color, silent, 28 + 22 min. (18 fps);

**Titan**, Klaus Lutz, 2008, 16mm black-and-white, silent, 13½ min. (18 fps).

Auditorium: «**Klaus Lutz: In the midst of his own unfolding**», illustrated talk (in English) by Hannes Schüpbach, 25 min.; screening of **The Beauty of My Island—Shooting Klaus Lutz**, Frank Matter, 1999, video (Betacam SP), 33 min.

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Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona CCCB, March 18, 2016

Hannes Schüpbach

## Klaus Lutz: In the midst of his own unfolding

What does it mean to speak about unfolding with regard to Klaus Lutz's works? And what about the absence of an objective view I'm referring to in the title of this talk, *In the midst of his own unfolding*?

Any artist can be said to be “unfolding.” And in the sequence of an œuvre, there is always a pushing forward from one thought to the next and one work that leads to another. And in any work of art something interior is brought outside so that there is a set relation between what an artist presents in his work and him- or herself. What is exceptional in Klaus Lutz's work is that we witness these processes and relations in the work itself, at the very base of its construction.

This artist is performing and recording his art as primarily and explicitly an ongoing experience and an acting out that leads from one formulation to the next. There is no still moment in Klaus Lutz's films. And they don't convey anything that is fixed and certain.

Klaus Lutz lets us take part in his evolving universe and in his search, his ever branching paths, his going further, his reaching out and his failures. He shows us his vulnerable search of a very particular and utterly personal language, driven by philosophical necessity. A language that can display in its very structure before our eyes and for our thoughts a *reflection* of this ongoing experience of unfolding.

In 2009, Lutz wrote a *Synopsis* of his newest film *Titan*, the film you have seen in second place. He didn't like to say much about his work but here had to submit a synopsis for the Toronto International Film Festival, where this film was to be premiered.

“Titan moves through a landscape consisting of white drawings.” (1)

Please note the expression “landscape,” and also the significant plural of the word “drawing.” In his films, we always find connected groups of drawings.

“Foreshadowing, a pair of big black legs are dancing simultaneously. Men at work exhume the beautiful face of the muse who opens her eyes slowly. (2) Titan's journey begins: he paddles in a white boat through outer space (3), landing in his kitchen where he builds an aeroplane to fly above Manhattan (4). He rests briefly in the middle of a film crew, continues and then flies through the mouth of a big dragon held by WTO protesters. Titan travels further to the roof of Helmhaus Zürich, ...”

“Helmhaus” is the municipal museum for contemporary art in Zurich where he had a large exhibition in 1999 and fell off a ladder.

“... tumbles inside where a balloon installation is going on with the second forewarning. Regardless he blows up a big balloon and travels to the Arabic Desert where he falls into the ruins of a mosque (5). A war is raging, rockets are flying. (6) Suddenly a big black figure attacks Titan, triumphs and nails him to the rocks. Titan begins to shake, a big fish rises up and gives him the strength to free himself. Titan embraces the fish and together they fly off over the East River ...”<sup>1</sup> (7)



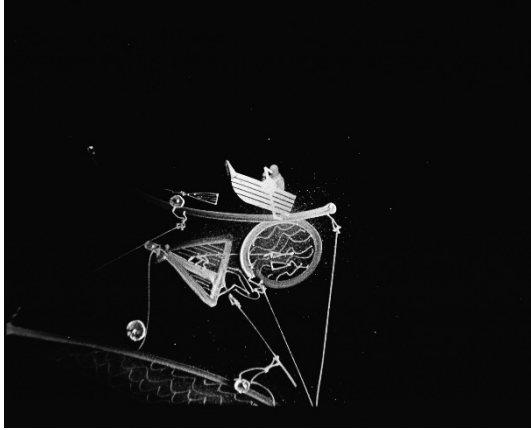
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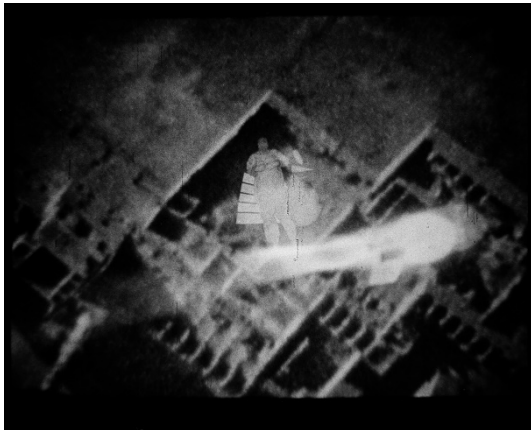
<sup>1</sup> Klaus Lutz: *TITAN (Synopsis)*. E-mail to the author on 02 July, 2009.



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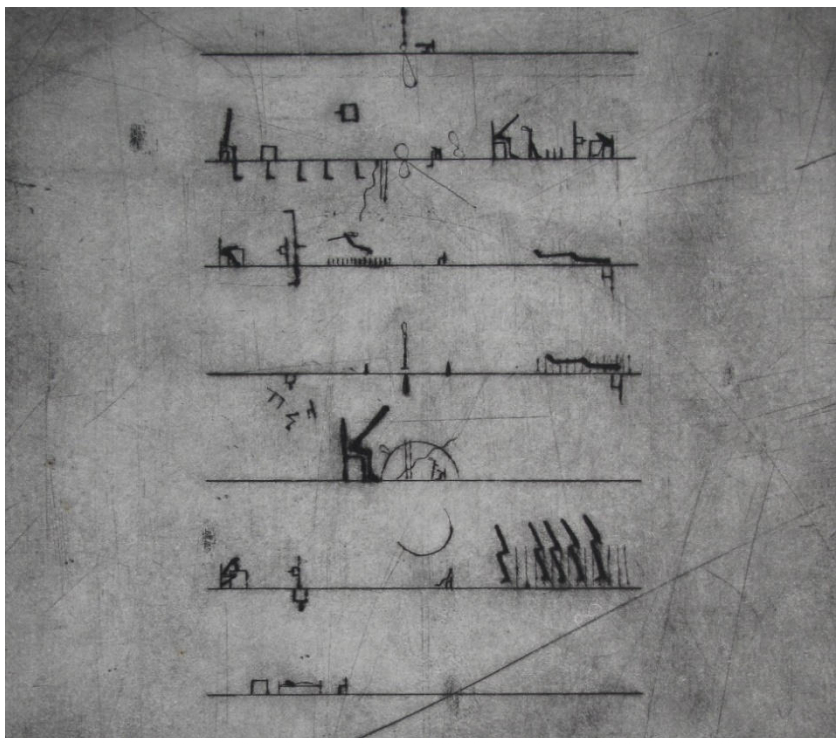
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*Film stills from "Titan," ca 2008. Black-and-white photographs, realized by the artist from 16mm film projection. The Estate of Klaus Lutz / Rotwand, Zurich.*

Klaus Lutz didn't like to explain his work. But fortunately there are scattered statements in his film proposals and meticulous performance flow charts, and there, one can find very revealing statements. Lutz finished his first film in 1987. About one of his early films, *Meteor Lecture* from 1989, he wrote that Meteor, the main figure, was actually identical to "the rock's animate, inner body," and then went on to sketch out how Meteor — and this can be seen in a film like *Titan*, as well — "drives his drawing cone into the drawing" and "creates, and is transported into, the next drawing." He then says, "This process continues; Meteor moves from drawing to

drawing to drawing.” These statements are very enlightening. First, the figures in Klaus Lutz’s films can embody something extremely precise, for example “the rock’s animate, inner body.”<sup>2</sup> They are particular acting entities in each film, forces of some kind, not always to be taken as human. Rather, they often appear as *ciphers* in the parallel world of his art which *represents* situations, actions, and processes. And secondly, Lutz also speaks clearly about the process of one drawing leading into the next by means of pointing and driving the drawing cone into the drawing. You have seen such moments in *Titan*, and very prominently in *Arabia* (1991), the first piece of tonight’s program.

The drawing cone is one of the central devices in his films. We are reminded that Lutz started out with works in dry-point. Throughout the 1970s he almost exclusively focused on printing and fabricating booklets and accordion folders with motifs he adapted for his own purposes from Robert Walser’s writings. Robert Walser, the Swiss writer who was born in 1878 and died in 1956, known for his short prose pieces, has a way of allowing us to witness, sentence by sentence, the ongoing process of writing. His meandering form is full of digressions and arabesques. The stories he wrote tell as much about their own writing as they usher us through a plot, and thus we seem to share, miraculously, as long as one sentence follows upon the next, the intimate space of the writer’s mind and his trails of thought.



Klaus Lutz, *«nebenbei schrieb ich im Industriequartier Gedichte»* (Robert Walser), 1976. Detail. Private collection. (The title can be translated as *«besides, I wrote poems in the industrial quarters»* [Robert Walser].)

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<sup>2</sup> Film proposal *Meteor Lecture*, ca 1997/1998. The original language here is English. Reproduced in *Klaus Lutz. Im Universum / In the Universe*, ed. Dorothea Strauss, [Exh. cat.] Zurich: Museum Haus Konstruktiv / Heidelberg: Kehrer, 2012, p. 92-93.

Here is the example of a dry-point inspired by Robert Walser, where Lutz has arranged figures on horizontal lines, sometimes hanging them upside down, through the operation of adding a second space. The simple icons that Lutz chose early on, “man,” “chair,” “table,” “bed,” are used to depict an ongoing story. It is known that inspiration for Lutz’s visual vocabulary, since the late 1960s, included the writings and pedagogical notebooks of Paul Klee, most notably the volume entitled *The Thinking Eye* which develops the elements of pictorial form, and also some bone-engravings by Eskimo people — like this example in Franz Boas’ book *Primitive Art*, first published in 1927.<sup>3</sup>

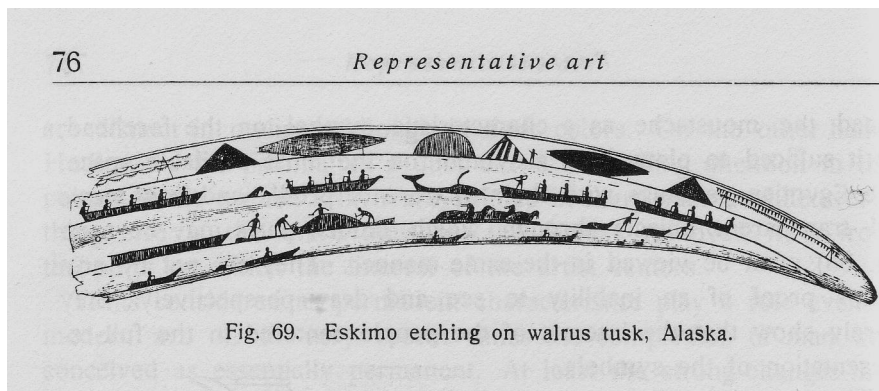
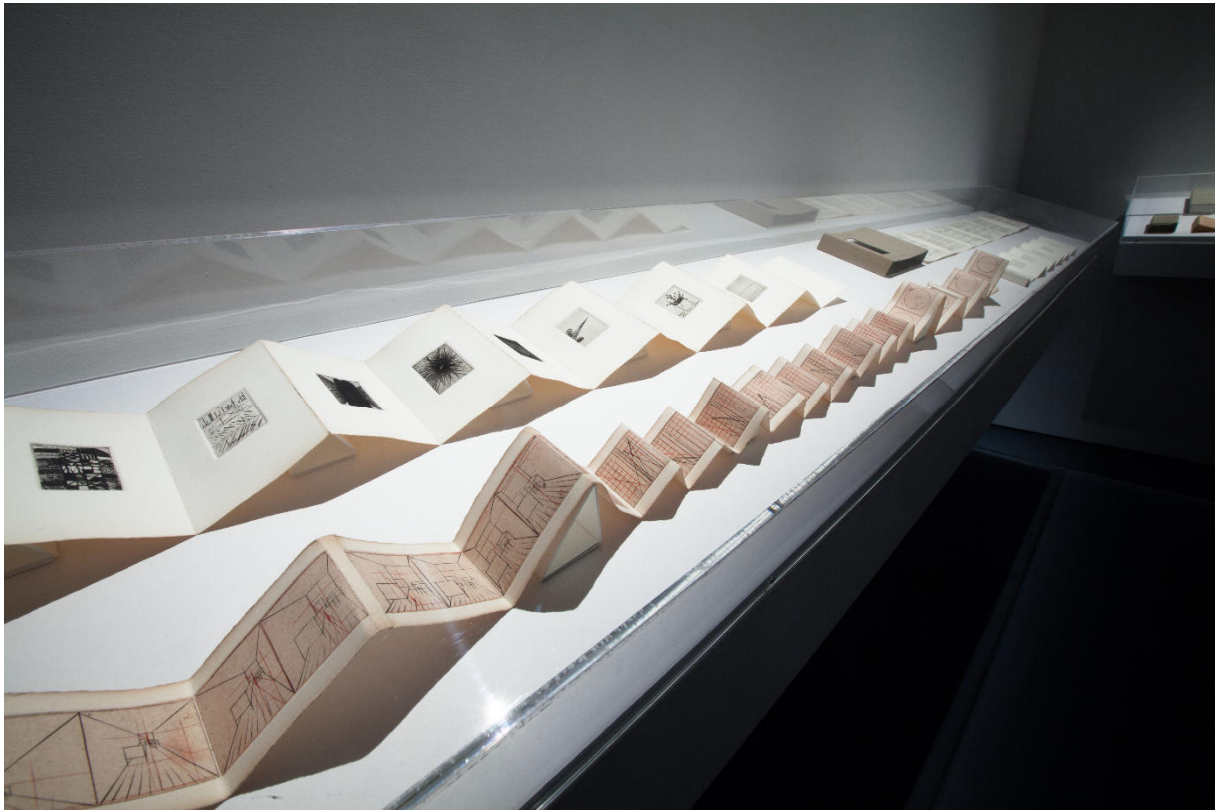


Fig. 69. Eskimo etching on walrus tusk, Alaska.

Franz Boas, *Primitive Art*, New York: Dover, 1955, p. 76 (first edition Oslo: H. Aschehoug, 1927). “Eskimo etching on walrus tusk, Alaska (A. M. N. H. [American Museum of Natural History, New York], 60/239).”

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Reto Hännly who mentioned to me both Paul Klee’s *Das bildnerische Denken* and the Eskimo bone-engravings. *Das bildnerische Denken* (volume I of *Schriften zur Form und Gestaltungslehre*), ed. Jürg Spiller. Basel: Benno Schwabe, 1956. (*The Thinking Eye. The Notebooks of Paul Klee*, vol. I, ed. Jürg Spiller, transl. Ralph Manheim. New York: Wittenborn, 1961.)



*Das Götzenbild* ('The Idol'), 1972, and *Zimmerstück* ('The Room Piece'), 1974, in the exhibition *Klaus Lutz: Selected Stories* at The Kitchen, New York, 2014. Photograph by Jason Mandella. (See also *Klaus Lutz: Im Universum / In the Universe*, Cat. Zurich, 2012, p. 42-43, 40-41)

The accordion folder booklets that Klaus Lutz made in the 1970s are stylistically varied. The first ones are composed from single images, like the top one here.

But more and more he tested different types of sequential arrangements to include an element of time and spatial transport.

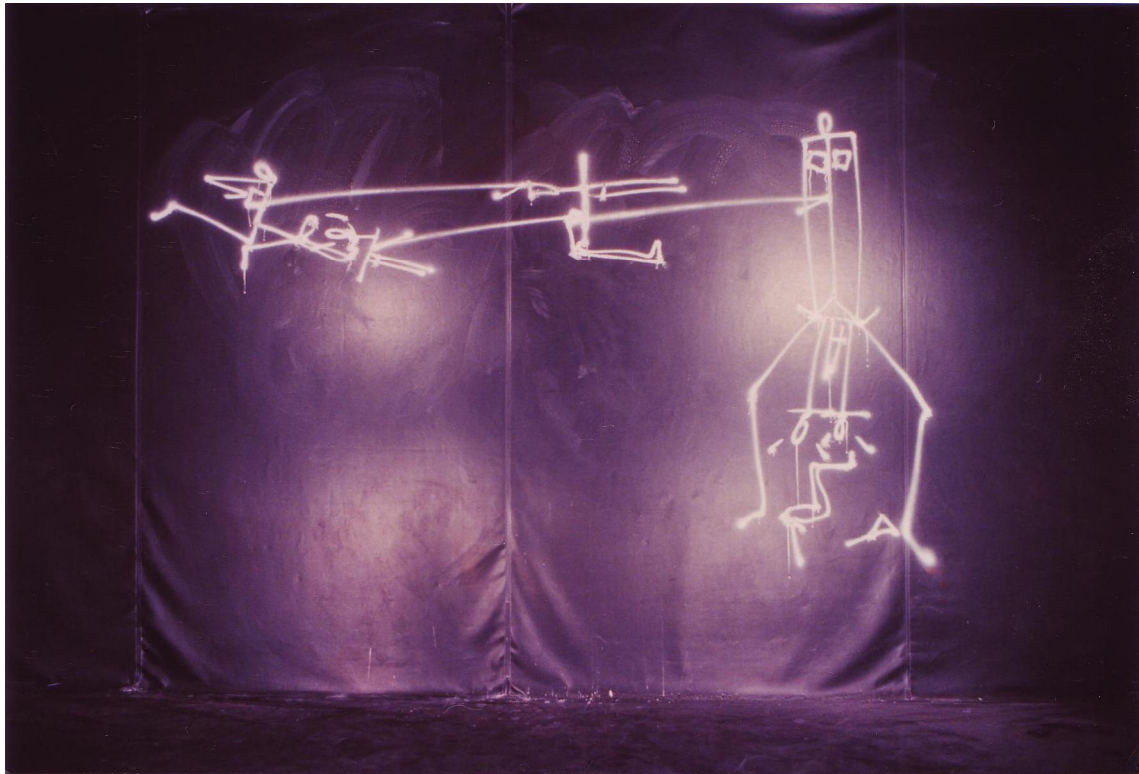


Accordion folders with prints: *Lebendes Bild (nach R. Walser)* ('Tableau vivant (After R. Walser).') See also Cat. Zurich, 2012, p. 42-43), 1976, and *Jakob von Gunten (nach R. Walser), Vorspiel Nr. 1*, 1976, in the exhibition *Klaus Lutz: Selected Stories* at The Kitchen, New York, 2014. Photograph by Jason Mandella.

Klaus Lutz didn't go to art school. He studied architecture at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology between 1960 and 1961, and also studied psychology and philosophy briefly at Zürich University, before becoming a primary school teacher, in 1962. Some traces of these different activities may be seen in his early work. In 1973 he left teaching and focused entirely on his work as an artist.

Drawing has always been at the center of Lutz's art. And this means something different than putting down the outline of an object seen in front of one's eyes; more and more, drawing also became for him a productive and expansive act of the body. Like children who do chalk drawings on the pavement. The desire to express ideas in the public space, in order to offer them to a much hoped-for *open society*, was looming behind the repression that many younger intellectuals and artists still felt in the later 1970s in Zurich — so much so that in 1980, a violent, anarchistic movement against established culture and its sacrosanct public funding broke out. In the case of Klaus Lutz, who had experienced movements of 1968 at the age of 28, an existential unease and questioning drove him to a further retreat into the studies of ideographic languages, mainly hieroglyphs and Old Chinese pictograms. Thus he hoped to come closer to the foundations of human experience between physical existence and thought process, beyond what he felt was often not more than idle ideological talk. During the years of the youth riots in Zurich, he lived in a simple studio in Genoa,

Italy, a space that he covered with a black lining, like his later space in New York. The color black which can annihilate the material confines of the actual room was to begin the process that led to Lutz's working in the medium of film; there, as in photography, the absence of information means a boundless, black void. Back in Zurich, during the mid-1980s he continued studying and developing pictographic systems of his own, and in 1987 finished his first film called *Graph*.



Photograph documenting large drawings on plastic planes, 1993. Private collection.

As can be seen in this photograph from 1993, taken in New York where Lutz had moved that same year, he expanded drawing not only beyond the single page or single format, but ultimately had in mind to go beyond the confines of the studio wall: he started to use drawings made with liquid chalk onto plasticized surfaces, black surfaces. In a letter to his close friend Susanne Waldburger he wrote:

“In April [1993] I drew a group of large pictures onto black (for the film) plastic sheets (120 x 160 cm). Picture is admittedly the wrong word. These are scenes, and they are ultimately not drawn onto plastic sheets but into the night. In the film I will draw those scenes further, with my body sign, etc. The best drawings, realized as desired, offer themselves to the wandering eye, but they reach their own life only when they wander themselves and when wandering takes place inside them.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Letter to SW, May 10, 1993. (“In diesem April zeichnete ich mit Kreide eine Gruppe grosser Bilder auf schwarze (für Film) Plastiktücher (120 x 160 cm). Bild ist zwar das falsche Wort. Es sind Szenen, eigentlich auch nicht auf Plastik, sondern in die Nacht hinaus gezogen. Im Film ziehe ich die Szenen weiter aus, mit meinem Körperzeichen, usw. Die besten und wirklich nach *desire* realisierten



Drawings for later films were realized on much smaller pieces of black material. And



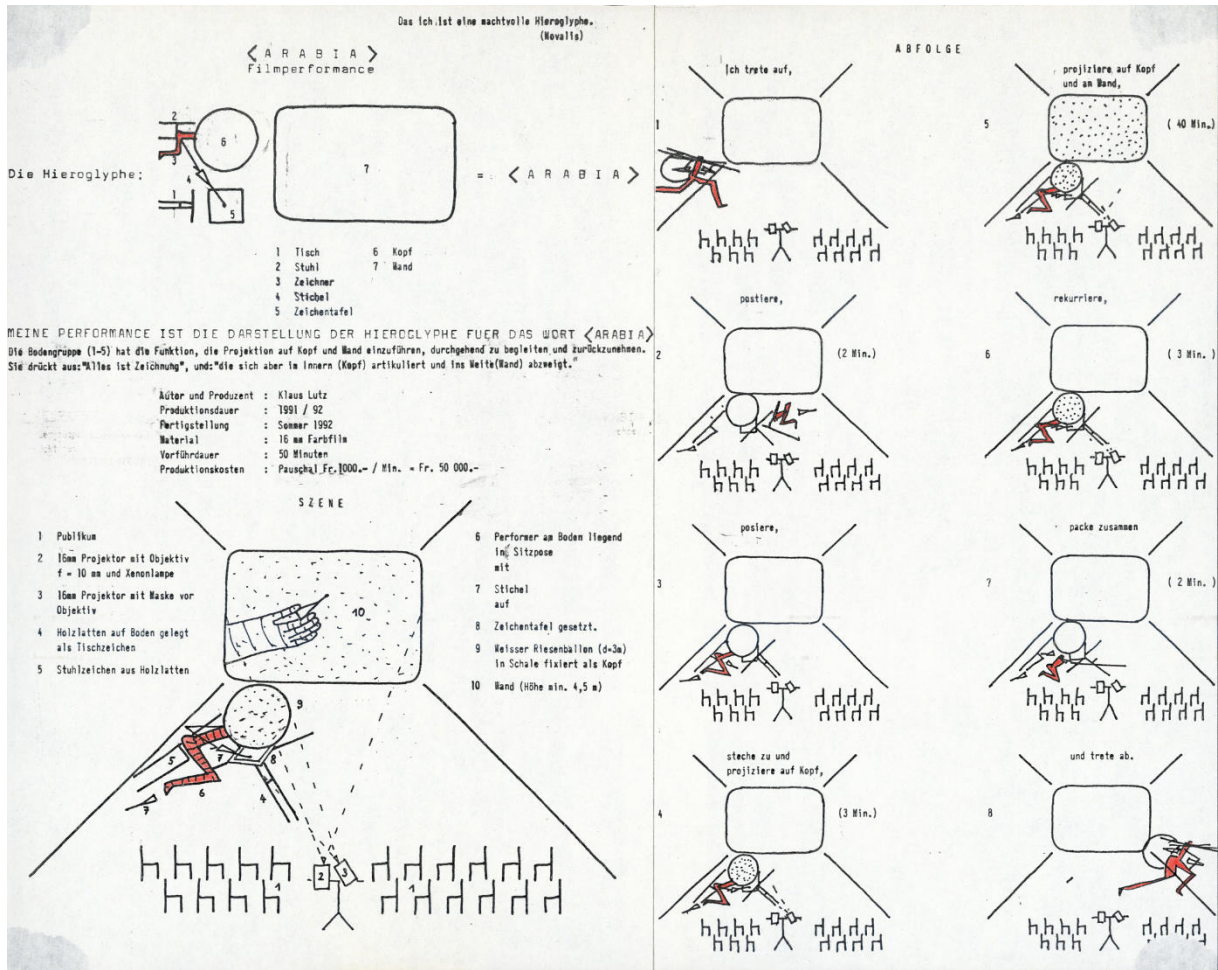
Chalk paintings for a new film, found in the artist's apartment at 110 East 7th Street in Manhattan, after his death, in September 2009. Photographs © Carl G. Friedrich.

Lutz used brushes to apply a mixture of chalk and water. The only surviving set of such drawings are the seven “scenes” that were found in Lutz’s apartment in Manhattan after his death in September 2009. Such drawings were not meant to be kept and the pigment was not fixated. By filming the drawings in his black studio, the artist transported the drawings into the photographic space that is free of earthly dimensions, very much like the space of imagination and thought.

This brings us back to the ciphers Klaus Lutz used in his films and in his “performances with film.”

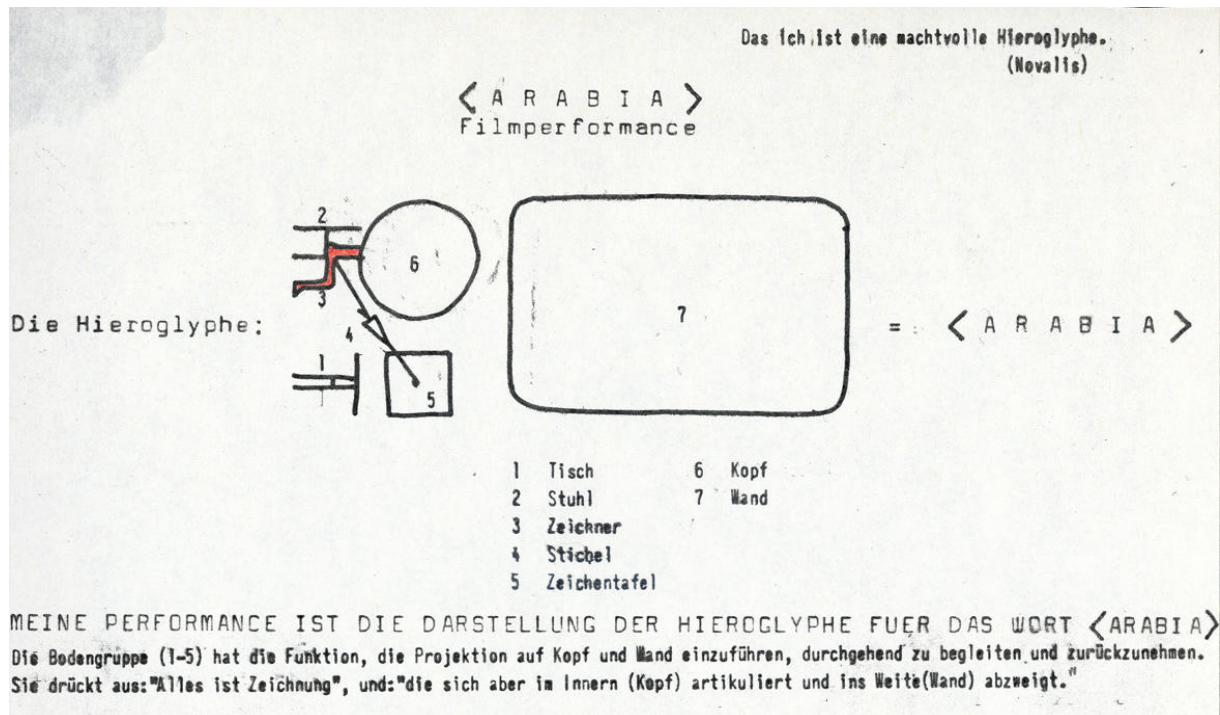
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Zeichnungen sind zum mit den Augen Herumwandern, aber ihr eigentliches Leben erhalten sie erst, wenn sie selber auch wandern und in ihnen gewandert wird.”)



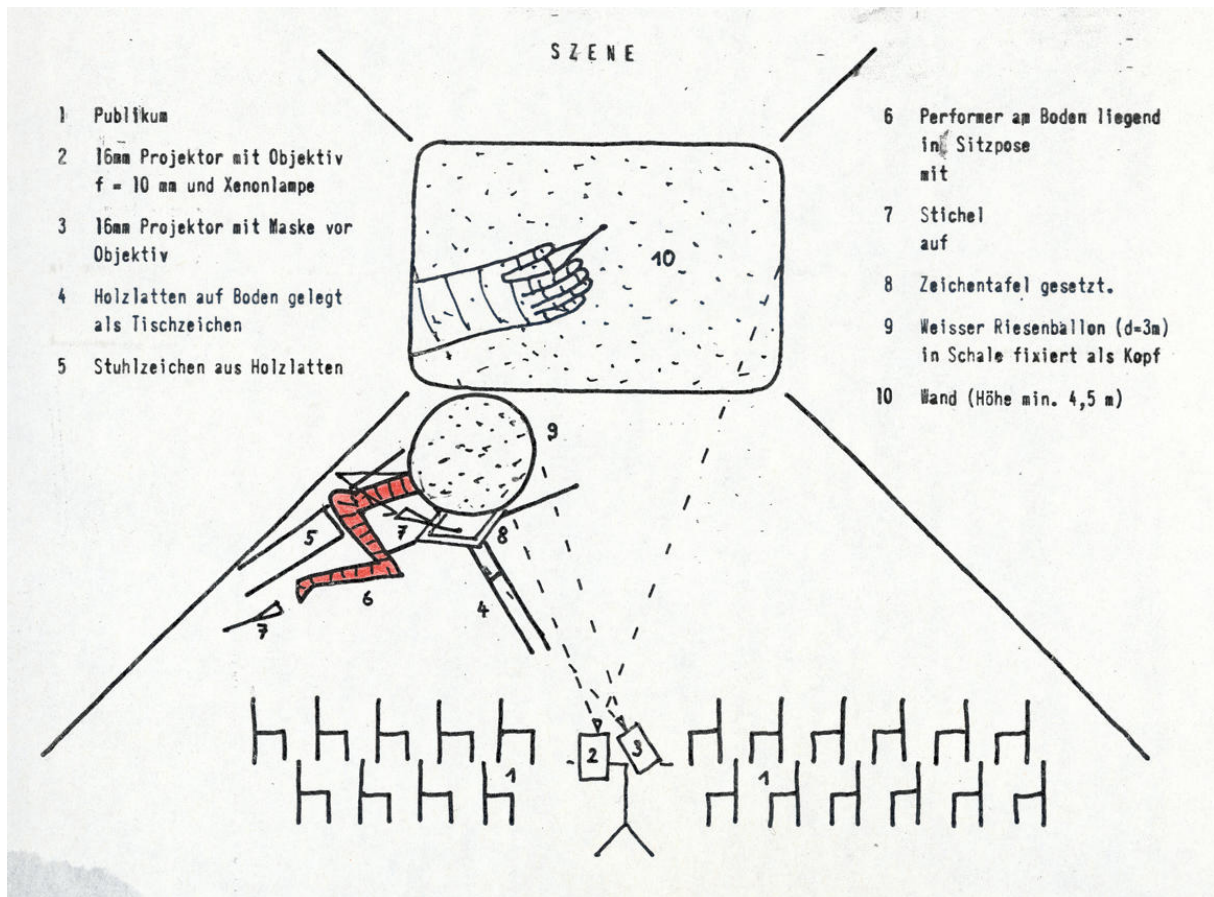
*(ARABIA)*, *Filmperformance* ('Arabia Film Performance'), ca. 1991, proposal with flow chart. The Estate of Klaus Lutz / Rotwand, Zurich.

*Arabia*, the first piece you have seen today was conceived as a "film performance."  
The performer was to lie on the floor

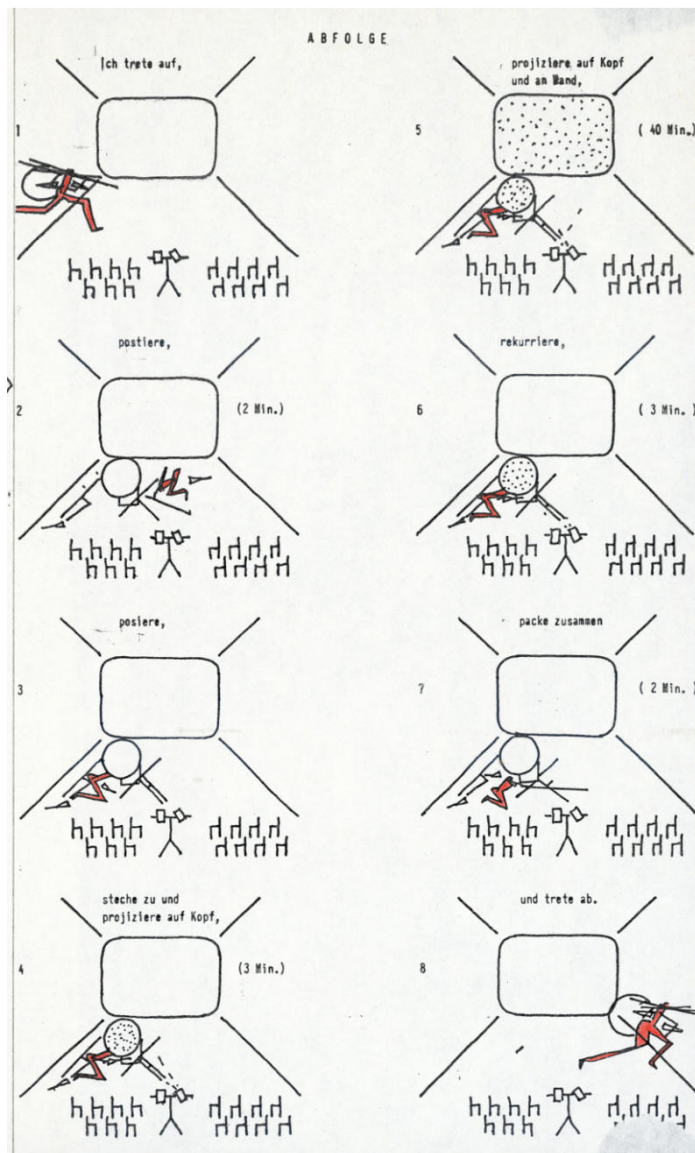


accompanied by a “table” sign and a “chair” sign. He puts his drawing cone onto the drawing board — number 5. The balloon is to be his “head”. In the line printed below the diagram, in upper case, Lutz states: “My performance is the rendering of the hieroglyph for the word <ARABIA><sup>5</sup>.” And he adds: “the grouping on the floor — number 1-5 — has the function to introduce, accompany and take the projection back onto head and wall. It expresses: ‘Everything is drawing,’ and ‘but it is a drawing that is articulated inside the head (or mind) and branches out into the distance (the wall).” The “scene” with these elements is rendered once more in the lower part of

<sup>5</sup> By putting angle brackets he may designate the word ARABIA to be seen either as a set of *graphemes* (in linguistics, the units of written language) or as a *notion* to be filled with individual sense-images.

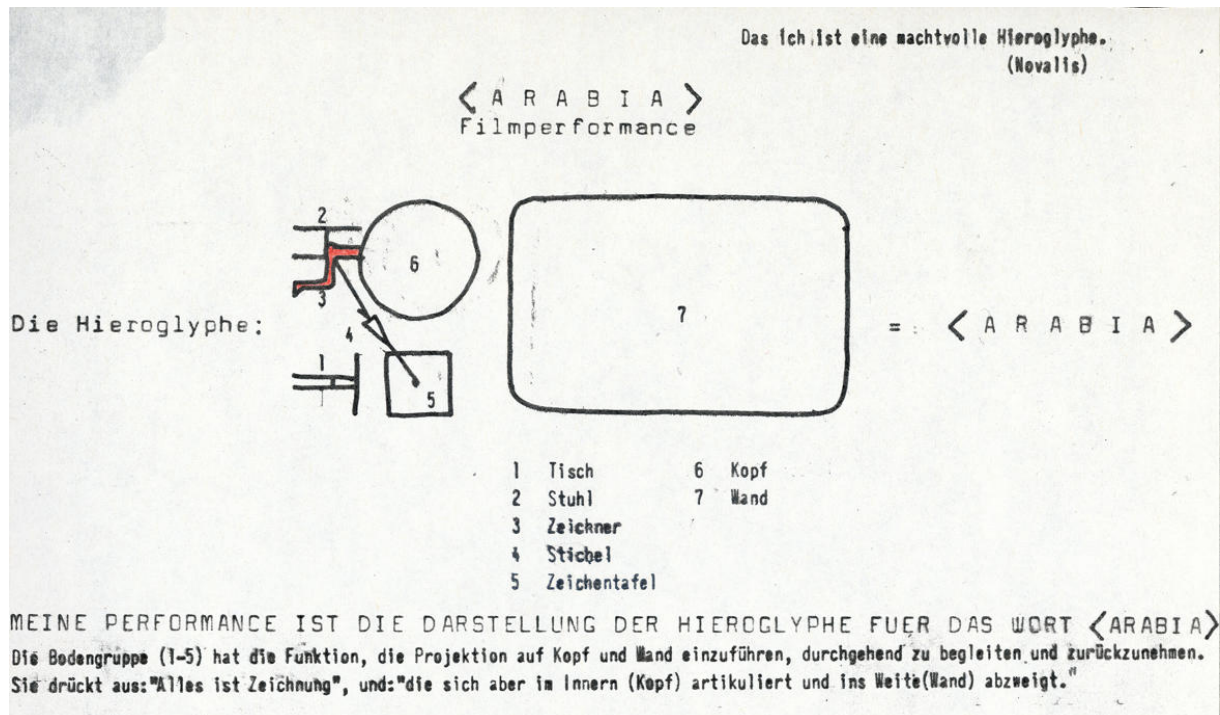


the page, where the actual physical elements are described in some detail. The hand of the figure using the drawing cone is repeated on the large screen as an extension or doubling of the performer's hand.



In the flow chart on the right hand page he shows how the performer enters the space, sets off the projection, first on the balloon, or “head,” and then “into the distance,” onto the wall behind. The wall projection would end, then the round projection, and the performer would exit.<sup>6</sup> I should add that Lutz himself already showed his works as installations without the live performance if it had to be in a gallery or museum.

<sup>6</sup> According to this flow chart, the film projected onto the balloon (*Arabia 2*) should be slightly longer than the one for the wall projection. A first version of *Arabia*, from which copies were bought for the art collection of the City of Zurich, in July 1992, was “260 and 270 m long, each film about 25 min.” (e-mail from Kunstsammlung der Stadt Zürich, Ramona Brückner, to the author, October 19, 2011). In the booklet the artist printed for his exhibition *Not Really for Sale*, Serge Ziegler at Elga Wimmer PCC, New York, 2007, both parts, *Arabia 1* and *Arabia 2* are indicated as being 20 minutes long. However, in the pair of originals of the films found after the artist’s death, *Arabia 1* (rectangular) is 28 or 21 min. long (at 18 or 24 frames p. second), and *Arabia 2* (round projection onto balloon, designated on the original can as “Reine Grammatik” (“Pure grammar”) is 22½ or 17 min. long (at 18 or 24 fps)). And from among the film *prints* that the artist had in his archive, there is an even longer, probably earlier, version of *Arabia 1*, running 31 or 23½ min. *Arabia 2* is the first film with round masking, but without the use of a spherical picture as in the later film *Field of Powder* (1993).



In this performative setting, the artist shows us both *how* and *what* he thinks while the word ARABIA works on him.

The term "hieroglyph"<sup>7</sup> takes on a specific meaning in the sentence written at the top of this page, "The self is a mighty hieroglyph. (Novalis)." Here, we must remind ourselves that Egyptian hieroglyphs were not yet deciphered in the 18th century, and the term "hieroglyphic" was often used for something that looks to us as if it had a specific meaning, but one we don't understand.

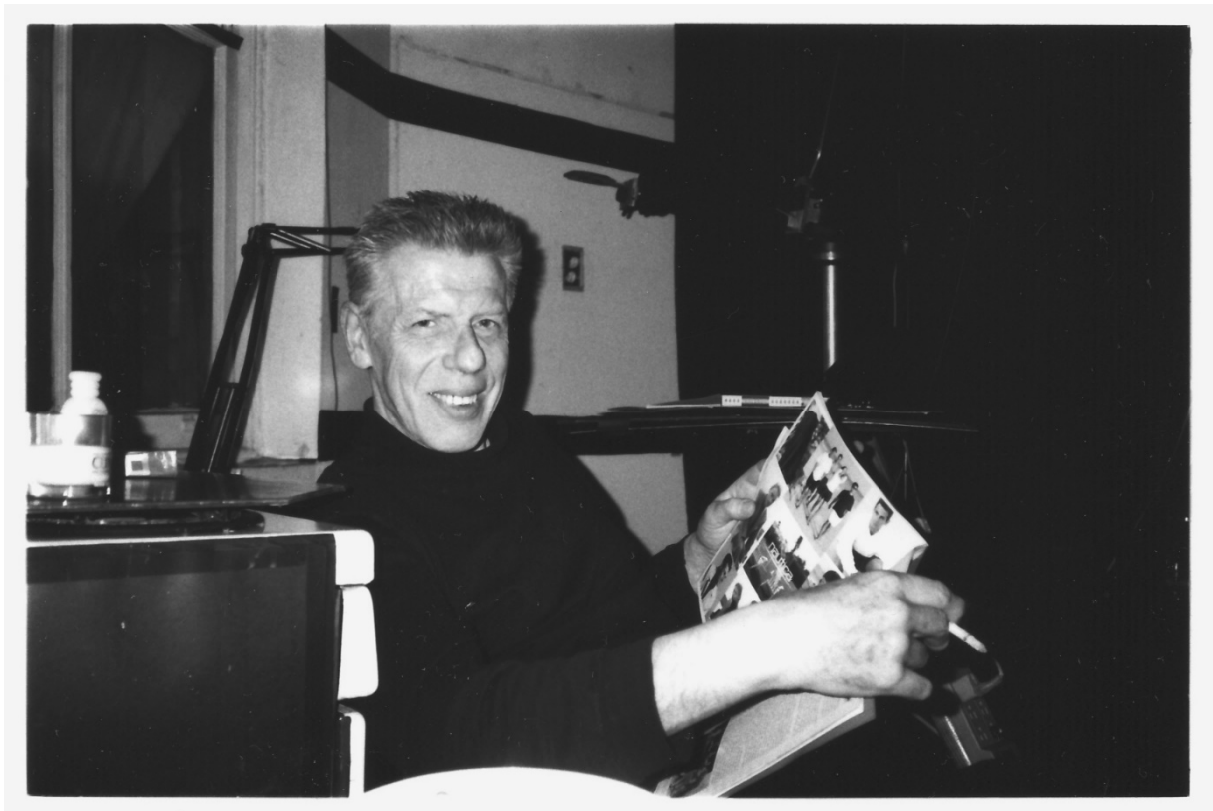
If the "self" is a secret writing, like any of the mysterious outer forms of nature are a "secret" — and "sacred" — "writing," then perhaps Lutz's art directs our attention to the fact that, as Novalis wrote in the first paragraph of his book *The Apprentice of Salis*, "the mind gropes after the key to that marvelous text, its essential grammar and syntax, but the groping will not take firm and reliable shape, and the key is not forthcoming."<sup>8</sup> Fully entangled in his own existence, the artist has to keep to himself, he has to hold up the "self" against the complex reality he is part of. All of Lutz's work is and has to be genuinely autobiographical. He is drawing and writing down himself. Everything that should become a visible part of his universe has to go through the tip of his drawing cone. Thereby, at times, he himself becomes the omnipotent creator of

<sup>7</sup> From Ancient Greek ἱερός [hierós], "sacred," and γλῦφή [glyphē], "engraving." After [de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hieroglyphenschrift](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hieroglyphenschrift) [accessed 09 March 2016].

<sup>8</sup> From a translation provided by Ross Jones and Elizabeth Sewell, published by Bill Ritchie via [www.emeralda.com/es/esprod/es\\_stamps/Novalis.htm](http://www.emeralda.com/es/esprod/es_stamps/Novalis.htm); accessed 10 March 2016. ("[Man] ahndet ... den Schlüssel dieser Wunderschrift, die Sprachlehre derselben, allein die Ahndung will sich selbst in keine feste Formen fügen, und scheint kein höherer Schlüssel werden zu wollen." Novalis, *Die Lehrlinge zu Sais*, written 1798-1799 (published posthumously, in 1802), in *Schriften*, vol. 1, p. 79.)

hieroglyphs. At other times he can fall back into being just a figure trying to understand its own trajectory.

Along a figure, and also along a given body, Klaus Lutz generates and follows the topography of the physical and of his ever evolving thoughts. The pictorial format he developed for this process and interior path, is uniquely his own. Like no other artist I know, he searches and finds the means to create and re-create a pictorial and ultimately philosophical language in which he remains incorporated. The “topography” between body and sign — in its irresolvable tension — is his universe. It is a secretion of his own, authentic presence.



Klaus Lutz in his apartment in Manhattan, after 1999. Photograph © Mary Bosakowski.

[www.klauslutz.ch](http://www.klauslutz.ch)

Book:

*Klaus Lutz — Im Universum / In the Universe, 2012*

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To complete this program you will see the documentary by Frank Matter, which is the only existing film showing Klaus Lutz’s working procedures during the making of one of his films, *The Beauty of My Island* (1999).

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