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Filming Your Own Life

Susan Mogul reflects and constructs her autobiography in her films

A smirk appears on the faces of the audience as the lights come back on after the screening. The scenes that unfold in the film "Driving Men," where the American artist Susan Mogul portrays herself through the men in her life, seem to remind some of their own entanglements with lovers and friends, discussions with brothers or fathers. "Why were you never married, by the way?" is one of the questions Mogul has repeatedly faced, and she returns it to the men now speaking about her in front of her camera: Why do you think I was never married? "Driving Men" – the full title being "Susan Mogul's Driving Men" because the artist always emphasizes the subjectivity of her selection of protagonists – is a humorous and profound exploration, occasionally clownish, with exhibitionist tendencies, provocative and ironic, but also with sad moments.

The ZDOK conference on newer forms of documentary filmmaking at ZHdK (May 5-6) under the title "Me, Myself and I. When Documentaries Become Performances" was dedicated to the works of Susan Mogul and David Sieveking ("David Wants to Fly"). Mogul is a pioneer of this artistic approach. The 62-year-old filmmaker moved from New York to L.A. in the seventies to become part of the feminist art movement there. Her early works, where she positioned herself as a performer in front of the camera – including a reverse striptease ("Dressing Up," 1973) that exposes viewer expectations – were initially shown in galleries. Once she spotted the name "Dennis Hopper" in her dentist's agenda, which prompted her to honor the actor with a cinematic letter: Mogul, brushing her teeth in the bathroom. Hopper never responded, she says amused.

Those who become acquainted with the artist may one day find themselves in the role of a reflection instrument for her performative self-explorations. "I work with people I have a personal relationship with," emphasizes Mogul. Selecting interviewees based on the theme of a project or for their factual expertise is not her style. The focal point is always herself. With the increasing convenience of (video) cameras, the scope of her self-questioning expanded. "Everyday Echo Street" (1993) is a cinematic diary that also reveals much about the people in Mogul's neighborhood. And in "Driving Men," she drives through Manhattan, Long Island, and Los Angeles with the men in her life.

In this film, on which Mogul worked for more than five years, central motifs from her body of work culminate, a "life's work" in the double sense. Self-quotes and footage, home movies, photographs, image collages that Mogul used to create abundantly in the past, along with new recordings – she weaves all of these into an associative tapestry with which she reconstructs and questions her autobiography.

However, unlike the self-confessing and exposure-hungry self-presenters in reality TV and YouTube, she maintains control over her product. While she may be

guided by chance, she decides in the editing room what will ultimately be seen in the film. Moreover, her interaction partners have previously waived their veto rights.

In her films, she can tell her life story the way she would have liked it to unfold, Mogul says in "Driving Men." Who wouldn't want to rewrite their biography? However, such a statement is never just the final reason for her. That's precisely what makes it stimulating.