

## **James Benning - Circling the Image**

A film by Reinhard Wulf

The American filmmaker James Benning has been one of the outstanding exponents of the structural film since the mid-1970s. Being an individual artist, he does work with no crew and always does all the work himself. Born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1942, he at first studied mathematics and worked as a teacher before re-enrolling at the University of Wisconsin in 1975 to study filmmaking and graphic arts, and going to New York as a freelance filmmaker in 1980. Alongside numerous experimental films, he has also created a series of projection and computer installations. Since 1987 he has lived in Val Verde, a small town near Los Angeles, and has been a teacher at the California Institute of the Arts.

Benning's artistic position has been strongly influenced by mathematics, by the creativity of mathematical thinking, and the search for subtle and elegant solutions. There is also something mathematical about the editing and the correlation of picture and text in his films. A main focus of his work is an interest in American landscapes. In long sequences influenced by still photography and early cinema, Benning takes a meditative look at nature in its archaic state, and at the interventions of human technology. A series of films in which the text plays an important visual or acoustic role (a diary in "North on Evers", newspaper reports in "Deseret" etc.) were followed between 1999 and 2001 by the films of the California Trilogy: "El Valley Centro" (about farmland and industrial landscapes), "Los" (about the city of Los Angeles) and "Sogobi" (about the wilderness), which each consist of 35 static two-and-a-half-minute sequences, linked by the original sounds in each case. With his new project "13LAKES", James Benning goes one step further towards reducing things to a minimum. The film focuses on thirteen large American lakes (including Salton Sea, Lake Powell, and Lake Michigan) along with their geographical and historical relationship to the landscape. Each lake is represented by one single shot, which will last seven to eight minutes. The intention is to show largely nothing except the sky, the surface of the water, and the way the light reflects on the water.

This documentary film was occasioned by "13LAKES", and was shot in California, Arizona and Utah in November 2002. It accompanies the artist for a week as he searches for locations and as he films the first two shots for his own film. It shows the artist on the road, the unceasing search for suitable locations and motifs, Benning's relationship with the landscape and with the solitude involved in his work. James Benning talks in great detail about his working method, his relationship with America, and on how he sees his role as an artist and filmmaker.

*running time: 83' 56"; DigiBeta; camera: Juergen Behrens; sound: Guenter Kunze; editing: Susanne Schweinheim; production manager: Erik Nacken; commissioning editor: Werner Duetsch; production company: Westdeutscher Rundfunk © 2003*

*contact: reinhard.wulf@wdr.de*

*world sales: www.germanunited.com; sales@germanunited.com*