Helga Fanderl

Present Tense

Like the quiet, yet intense, meteorological quivering in an Agnes Martin grid painting, presence in art is a notion both unrelentingly subjective and resolutely romantic. At least, it used to be. The pleasurable anxiety that often accompanies the encounters that banish our busyness, allay our fears, and remind us of our existence has become increasingly rare. With overly expository contexts and posturing, competing visibility through innumerable channels of distribution and communication, the pressure to pronounce ourselves, our stunning addiction to technology and exacerbated connectedness (what the French call la connectivité en permanence and the even more damning la tête au carré, henceforth replacing Gainsbourg’s goofy à tête de chou!), intimate encounters with art are suddenly too few and far between. The “democratization of art” is one of the greatest fallacies of our time—as Béla Tarr put it so succinctly, “Democracy doesn’t belong to the world of art”—as authenticity is constantly mediated by infinite mise en abymes; we are caught in a ricochet of distance, and false presence.

With our bodies bearing witness to our contemporary social condition (our twitchy fingers, hunched shoulders, fidgety nervous systems, short attention spans, general and contagious impatience), Godard’s quippy observation, “One must look up and not down to experience the cinema,” resonates like never before.

Much has and is being said about our current state of perpetual present: that information is rendered instantaneously, that this presence is not only present but prolonged, and hence one that is characterized by an obsession with the past, We (hyper) link back into the aptly termed “imperfect” tense (l’imparfait). Yet for all the theorizing about this newly defined present tense, in which of course moving images play such a crucial role (e.g., cinema’s power to resurrect and re-animate), our presence is too often mired and mitigated not only by an immediate looking back—crucial to looking forward—but a profound inaccessibility to emotion, sensuality, release, pleasure, simplicity. When “poetry” rings precious and the “sublime” sounds silly (our inauthenticity, again?), how best to achieve a fulsome experience of beauty in the world, whether abstract or via the particularity of things?

Characterized, perhaps somewhat inaccurately, by a rare and rousing simplicity, the work of Super 8 artist Helga Fanderl yields an extraordinary power to quell panic and renew the senses. Her extremely short, silent, and in-camera-edited Super 8 films are evocatively composed of the present moment. They breathe, and appear effortless, despite the substantial labour and determination with which they are imbued. Resulting from a sustained, concentrated, and, at times, trepidatious engagement with the world, Fanderl’s artmaking is refreshingly modest, focused, and, above all, open. Eschewing precision and polish, though still structured and skillful, her films depict a startling intimacy. Whether capturing the fairy-tale fits and starts of young French girls playing in a park wearing red and royal blue Sunday dresses (Mädchen, 1995), closely observing a tray of glassware on a ship as the sea reflects and refracts through their crystalline shapes (Gläser, 2011), or following at close range the semi-circular motion of a handsome, pacing leopard, its spots evoking rhythmic patterns through Fanderl’s intuitive shooting process (Leopard, 2012), the artist fully gives herself over to the present moment and allows us to bask in it.

Like a sprawling catalogue of “brief glimpses of beauty,” Fanderl’s filmography is diaristic to a degree (though worlds away from home movies) as it traces the peregrinations of the artist, revealing an interest and passion for certain visual motifs, textures, and movement, but also place. Native to the small town of Ingolstadt, Germany, her adoptive city of Paris has become, as it has for countless artists through the ages, an endless source of inspiration. Joyous fireworks exploding near the Eiffel tower, a French fairground, the unmistakable contours and elegance of a Parisian park—snippet scenes so recognizable and iconic yet terrifiedly idiosyncratic and personal. Fanderl’s films reveal a beguiling curiosity for the world generally, translated through specificity. Finding fascination in daily existence, her subject matter is rendered in small-scale gestures, which, while they may not be overtly political or topical, are ones that restore meaning to the fabric of life. Tactility, then, is crucial and her medium of choice—a small gauge, not a lesser gauge—is inextricably linked to her creative expression. An artistic choice, which has, on the one hand, significantly limited her public pres-
entation options, and on the other, resulted in unique site-specific screenings that complement her artwork and produce memorable moments that linger long into the night.

The balm-like quality of her work, and its committed continuation despite the encroachment of “digital’s dictatorship” (la dictature du numérique, Godard again, from Les trois désastres) bespeaks a quiet rebellion against our current condition. Perhaps Fanderl’s greatest contribution is to reinstate the present with pure aesthetic experience, doing so not by going back in time, but beyond it, capturing not only its essence but also its material. The following interview demonstrates an artist grappling with notions of intimacy, technical constraints, articulation, arrangement, and the devastating prospect of losing one’s chosen and necessary medium. While we’ve heard from numerous artists, most famously from Tacita Dean, about how the advent of one technology shouldn’t preclude an existing one—one so rich, with its own established history, language, and formal attributes—as well as from proponents of the artisanal lab movements across the globe, Fanderl’s candid, charming, and matter-of-fact descriptions achingly reveal the fragility of the situation and what’s at stake. Speaking for herself and not others, she makes all too clear the beauty that we cannot afford to lose.

**Cinema Scope**: Over the years, your films have been variously compared to songs, poems, haikus, paintings. Are any of these comparisons apt?

**Helga Fanderl**: There is a German saying, Vergleiche hinken, meaning “comparisons are limping.” They never fit exactly. On the other hand, comparisons help to signify what is not easy to name or has not yet been named, allowing us to express affinities and similarities, but also make clear what is different.

I’ll give you an example: in the very first film that I have acknowledged as an accomplished work, *See (Lake)* from 1986 (ca. 2 min. long), you see the...
I feel indeed very much attracted to light and shadow, to colours, to rhythmical patterns, to movements and qualities of water, wind, earth, and fire. More generally, I respond to the animated world in which we coexist with fauna, flora, and the elements, although we sometimes forget about these. They all can become my visual “material” for filmic translation and metamorphosis. I like to observe and make visible (sometimes hidden) qualities of what I discover, to capture and transform the moment and make it last on film.

It was often said that See has a painterly quality. On the one hand, the subject matter is reminiscent of landscape painting. On the other hand, the composition or construction of my image within the frame, the concentration on one image shot again and again, like brush strokes, the texture of my images, the enhancing of the surface, the autumn colours, seem to motivate this comparison.

I use the technique of in-camera editing, working in front of the motif, reacting to and corresponding with it, creating the film in one gesture, as it were while I am filming, going deep into and exploring the image as image. This may also explain partly the comparison with painting. Consciously I am not thinking of “painting” with film, but when I discover a scene, an event that challenges me to make a film, I might be inspired by paintings that have deeply impressed me and formed my vision, above all paintings in which every part of the surface is alive, almost in movement, vibrating and evoking a very sensual, almost tactile feeling. In my films there is maybe a certain affinity for the openness and the elliptical quality of sketches, allowing for the imagination, immediacy, freshness of capturing the moment. Or, if you want, an affinity with the process of drawing.

Scope: Although interiors are represented, a plein air quality characterizes many of your films. Are you drawn to this tradition of artmaking, or is it more about the freedom of movement and the plenitude and diversity of natural shapes and phenomena?

Fanderl: I like to discover places, activities, and rhythms in real life that impress me and awaken a deeper interest. There is never a mise en scène in my work. I don’t use lighting devices. Therefore, I depend on light conditions which are mostly more easy to find outdoors rather than indoors.

I use the technique of in-camera editing, working in front of the motif, reacting to and corresponding with it, creating the film in one gesture, as it were while I am filming, going deep into and exploring the image as image. This may also explain partly the comparison with painting. Consciously I am not thinking of “painting” with film, but when I discover a scene, an event that challenges me to make a film, I might be inspired by paintings that have deeply impressed me and formed my vision, above all paintings in which every part of the surface is alive, almost in movement, vibrating and evoking a very sensual, almost tactile feeling. In my films there is maybe a certain affinity for the openness and the elliptical quality of sketches, allowing for the imagination, immediacy, freshness of capturing the moment. Or, if you want, an affinity with the process of drawing.

Scope: Although interiors are represented, a plein air quality characterizes many of your films. Are you drawn to this tradition of artmaking, or is it more about the freedom of movement and the plenitude and diversity of natural shapes and phenomena?

Fanderl: I like to discover places, activities, and rhythms in real life that impress me and awaken a deeper interest. There is never a mise en scène in my work. I don’t use lighting devices. Therefore, I depend on light conditions which are mostly more easy to find outdoors rather than indoors.
but when the qualities I mentioned before are given in an interior situation I also love to film inside, above all when there is a window or a door evoking a beyond. I appreciate *plein air* and *intérieurs* paintings whenever they are good. It would be wonderful if I could reach their visual strength, liveliness, and beauty with my films.

**Scope:** You speak about your films in terms of “modules” or “units.” Given their brevity, you assemble a few together to form groupings that provide the basis for interchange given different presentation scenarios. Can you discuss this method of presenting and how it affects your status as artist/self-curator and archivist?

**Fanderl:** I speak in terms of “modules” and “units” only or mostly when I refer to my 16mm blow-ups. When I started to make 16mm prints of my original Super 8 work—forced by the disappearance of labs making Super 8 prints—I decided not to have printed individual films, but small “composed” ensembles of selected films. The order of the films of these “modules” or “units” remains unchanged, but when I am programming and screening my work I can combine and interchange those groupings of films in a temporary “montage.”

From the very beginning I used to screen my films in varying constellations. Their brevity and the different formal approaches that I find for different subjects made it necessary to think of an adequate form of presentation. To “compose” specific programs for every screening is not so much about emphasizing every single film, but about evoking my filmmaking as a whole. In changing contexts, every single film reveals different meanings, nuances, and resonances, and is open to different and somehow inexhaustible interpretations. With the exception of some series, my films are all created as individual works. Thus there is a big variety of motifs, shapes, tempos, rhythms, and colours in my work. Yet the camera is always handheld, an organic extension of the sense of touch.

When I make ephemeral programs I enhance correspondences, similarities, oppositions, and analogies, allowing for free associations and intense filmic experiences for the viewer. As I try to find a specific film form for each subject matter resulting in a balance of reality, perception, and emotion, I try to find a specific form of presentation for my films for every screening. Becoming the programmer of my films came out of the logistics of my Super 8 work and is an equally important part of my artwork. Shifting to 16mm and working with varying “modules” means continuing this practice in another way. As the body of my work has grown significantly over the years, one could say that I use it as a kind of living archive.

**Scope:** Your method of filmmaking is extremely intimate; one feels both a fervent and sometimes tentative engagement with the world. Have you made films that you've never shown for private reasons? Have you shied away from filming certain subjects?

**Fanderl:** It sometimes takes time until I overcome the feeling that a film is too intimate. This worry did and does not only concern films that deal with the man I loved most or a series of self-portraits. I easily feel uncomfortable to show myself, my enthusiasm and passion in communing with subjects that seem not to be of public interest or “important” or “relevant” with respect
to political, social, theoretical, or artistic actuality. I have to cope with these apprehensions. It only makes sense for me to film personal visions and to accept the challenge of responding with film.

It happens also that I feel uncomfortable when I film people who are not aware of being filmed. There's one film that I think is really fascinating, but that I have never included in one of my programs. I made it during a boat ride on the lake in Zurich on a sunny day. The light and colours were perfect. A young beautiful woman was sitting next to the boat's rail and stood up at times looking at the lake. She served as a kind of repoussoir in front of the waters streaming past behind the rail. I am sure that she was not aware of being filmed from above and behind. She could not hear the sound of my recording because it was too loud. Surprisingly at one of the stops her boyfriend appeared smiling at her and greeted her tenderly. I went on filming them caressing each other until the man—also surprisingly—disappeared.

Normally I would shy away from filming unknown people embracing each other, without their knowledge. On the other hand, I was not looking for this situation. It happened. Asking strangers if they accept to be filmed does not make sense either. People always start to act in front of the camera. But I am interested in real life, not in staging.

I can film intimately people that are close to me or are concentrated on what they are doing. Through experience, the best condition to film people is when they are working or playing and accept my presence and my camera, working and playing like them. I think it is fine when they sometimes look at me and at the camera. This is real communication and not illusion.

Scope: I believe you once referred to the act of in-camera editing as being risky? Can you expand on that?

Fanderl: The Super 8 film strip and single image are so small that an exact editing process and invisible montage are more than difficult when you work with innumerable short and very short shots and clusters of single frames. I found out quite soon that it made more sense to concentrate on in-camera editing. In the second half of the '80s when I started to make films, the modest cost of Kodachrome 40 and processing helped me to experience intensely direct filmmaking and not to be afraid of mistakes or failure. The more I intensified my working with Super 8 cameras the more I developed my personal vision and style, and discovered their poetic qualities.

The act of in-camera editing always includes the risk of failure. I cannot control what I film, neither the subject in front of the camera nor the result of my formal decisions. While I'm filming, I have to imagine the overall pace, shape, and structure of the film, I have to trust my intuition and skills in order to find the adequate means of expression concerning the framing, focal length, and recording speed, I must keep in touch with what I'm filming, I have to concentrate, to be very patient and alert, sometimes for hours, remember the sequences I have already shot, anticipate the ones that follow, and sense what I'm aiming at.

This state of mind is very intense and exciting. It is as if all mental, emotional, and technical conditions have to converge and coincide in order to make a good film. Sometimes this kind of filming in one gesture reminds me of Zen calligraphy. There is no possibility to correct and change. The work reveals the state of mind at the moment of its creation.

Scope: So many of your films—I think specifically of Binsen (2003) or Riesenrad (2001)—are about the graphic quality of shapes and patterns that you've mentioned. And yet the dimension of time is crucial as the temporality allows for rhythms to flow and accrue. Can you discuss the relationship between the movement in the frame versus the movement that comes from you and your hand?

Fanderl: I respond spontaneously to rhythmic movements, observing them and trying to find out how they affect the subjects and me, what is their specificity and power? I discover and explore these movements through the viewfinder, using different focal lengths, in order to study structures and details, sensing the appropriate distance, concreteness and abstraction, and finding the right pace. Depending on the subject and my ideas, there are many possibilities to deal with movements and to shape filmic time.

Sometimes I just record the movement in the frame, in one take, visualizing inherent rhythms, like for example in Pfau (1991). The bird is displaying its plumage and seems to perform in front of me, moving towards the camera, hesitating, changing direction, going back, turning around at the end. I follow attentively all these movements by keeping the peacock's fan filling the frame. The reciprocity of the filmed movement and the finely tuned movement of my handheld camera transform this banal dance into a dense sensual film spectacle allowing for detailed observations. When the peacock turns around twice at the end, the reverse side of its sumptuous fan echoes the patterns of a white bench and a white wastebasket.

More frequently I work with changing speeds, creating a complex time structure within each film. Alternating and combining speeds, "normal"
In *Binsen*, for example, I film the wind moving the wild reeds and the surface of a lake. There are short takes with different focal lengths and speeds, separated and accentuated by very short pauses of black leader. Different images of “the same” arise. According to these changes the texture of the aquatic plants also changes, seeming more or less dense, more or less abstract, their movement faster or slower. With every image their swaying in the breeze evokes a different tactile and musical impression.

In *Riesenrad*, I film a playground from high above, visualizing and playing with the simultaneity of different movements of all kind of roundabouts. The main movement is the one of a Ferris wheel whose gondolas are defiling vertically similar to a film strip. Other merry-go-rounds and carousels describe various circular movements. It is as if you looked at a colourful model of an amusement park. The children and people are tiny. Combining again so-called normal speed with clusters of single frame and changing focal lengths, I create an extraordinary interplay of varying mechanical rhythms and transform seemingly familiar scenery into strange and almost enigmatic imagery, full of opposing rhythms.

**Scope:** How do you feel about your 16mm blow-ups?

**Fanderl:** When I could no longer get Super 8 prints from reversal originals, I had to make up my mind in order to accept 16mm blow-ups, since I wanted to show new films and to continue with analogue film. It took me quite a while to show the 16mm prints. I suffered from the distance and the loss of intimacy when they were projected in bigger cinemas and also from the different grain and colours. Slowly I learned to accept and appreciate them as a variation of my work. Two years ago I saw for the first time a reel of black-and-white films projected on a huge screen in a huge cinema in Oberhausen. This projection made it clear that the 16mm blow-ups are really something else. In a powerful and amazing way they make visible and monumentalize inherent graphical and sculptural qualities and the materiality of the films.

I found it a good new experience when I made my first installation with a 16mm film loop in a gallery space. It was also very interesting to create a site-specific event in a huge empty hall of a former Citroën garage where I set up a Super 8 cinema and a 16mm cinema.

**Scope:** What place does celluloid have in galleries and museums? What are your ideal presentation scenarios?

**Fanderl:** In galleries and museums it is rather rare that one can enjoy celluloid in appropriate conditions. Analogue film needs protection against light and sound of all kind that do not belong to the work. The viewer should be invited to sit comfortably if there is duration, so that one can concentrate instead of walking by or in and out. When there is a beginning and an end of a work and not a loop there should be a screening schedule for real screenings within an exhibition space. If the film is shown on loops there should always be somebody to make sure that the projection works. It happens that a film is out of focus or is not transported and that the framer has to be adjusted. A good solution for showing films on a loop is the possibility for the viewer to switch on the projector and also stop the projection, so that the film is not running all the time and that one gets a sense of what a projection is like.

I think that there is always a site-specific challenge as well as the challenge to find the adequate ways of presenting films that fit their nature and qualities, to find a balance between the medium’s particularities, the artist’s intentions and the possibilities that the exhibition space is offering. Therefore it is difficult to define abstractly an ideal presentation scenario.

Some day, I would like to expose my work in a big exhibition space where I could build a small Super 8 house like a sculpture consisting of a Super 8 cinema and filmothèque that would be transparent outside the screening schedule and obscured during projections. I could present changing programs as a live event maybe once a day. Depending on the space I could make an installation with a selection of 16mm prints unfolding in spatial rather than in temporal order. I also would like to include the installation of a triptych with digitized films and sound in an appropriate closed space.

**Scope:** A ready-made exhibition. Museums take note!