

Helga Fanderl /
Nicky Hamlyn

Discovering the Pro-filmic

Nicky Hamlyn studied fine art at Reading University where he became interested in film. Later, he joined the London Filmmakers' Co-op and was co-founder of the journal *Undercut*. His work includes 16mm films, expanded works and video. He often uses the camera as a means to explore his immediate environment, testing ideas about representation and the productive relationship between the lens, the frame and the form of his subject matter. Hamlyn has written widely on artists' film and video, published his book *Film Art Phenomena* in 2003 and recently co-edited the books *Kurt Kren: Structural Film*, with Simon Payne and A.L. Rees, and *Experimental and Expanded Animation: Current Perspectives and Practices*, with Vicky Smith. He is Professor of Experimental Film at the University for the Creative Arts, Canterbury and Tutor in Visual Communication at the Royal College of Art.

Helga Fanderl initially studied German, Romance Languages and literature. After working as a professor of literature, in Frankfurt, for many years, she decided to study art. She attended the Städelschule academy of art in Frankfurt and then Cooper Union in New York. Since then she has developed a unique Super 8mm film practice. Her films are partially systematic but the everyday subjects that she documents and the process of editing in-camera make for a form of shooting that is responsive and lyrical. She is a prolific filmmaker and often curates and introduces the screenings of her own work in unique programmes. Fanderl's films have won many awards including the Coutts Contemporary Art Award and the German Film Critics Association Prize for Experimental Film.

Nicky Hamlyn — How did you become interested in filmmaking?

Helga Fanderl — I had studied German, French and Italian literature and language. I loved poetry and dense, short forms of prose, meaning musicality and rhythm. I felt a deep wish to become a poet, but it took me a long time to find the right medium. Not words, but film images, not a pen or a typewriter, but a Super 8 camera helped me to find true poetic expression. But my love for poetry and literature found its way into my films.

I discovered what attracts me about film more or less by chance, attending an artist friend's workshop 'Super8 as an Artistic Medium'. I bought my first used S8 camera, a Nizo, a S8 projector which scratched my first films, and a viewer. The small and nice group went out filming in the same places, first at Frankfurt Railway Station, then somewhere in nature near the city. We projected and watched the processed films together and talked about them. That was my first visual instruction in film. The Swiss filmmaker Urs Breitenstein confronted me with film as an artistic medium. I seemed to be the only participant who had not yet been touched by experimental film, which Peter Kubelka taught then at the art school of Frankfurt. I began to pay attention to formal decisions when filming, got to know the camera and how it worked, to operate it freely, and to understand film as structuring and shaping time.

The film course did not last long and ended just when I began to enjoy going out into the world with my camera. I continued to film, trying out a lot of things and developing my camera skills, my sense of finding images and rhythms. I loved the moment when, looking through the viewfinder, I saw an image of what I was interested in – not any longer the totality of the place and what was happening around me – and was able to concentrate on what inspired me.

I slowly learned in-camera editing and enjoyed the intensity of direct filmmaking, the close relationship between my eye on the viewfinder, one hand holding and the other operating the camera, and the object of my interest as well as my cinematic conception. Investigating the latter, I felt and reflected somehow what moved me to film while trying at the same time to transfer the experience into a purely visual film language.

I would like to add that thanks to friends I got very close to the visual arts, above all to painting and drawing. I even attended classes of art history, but it was more important to see and study good work in museums and galleries. The love for painting and drawing became very important for my

filmmaking.

I wonder why I was never really interested in photography. I believe that the temporal aspect of film, frame-by-frame, tempo and rhythm, makes the difference. Pushing the trigger, I hear the duration of every take. I sense the 1, 6, 9, 18, 24, 36 or 54 frames per second (depending on the type of camera). I like to find the right image and time-form in correspondence with the subject matter and my inner vision. One could say that I like to play the camera as my instrument, making 'music for the eyes' (as Peter Kubelka described it).

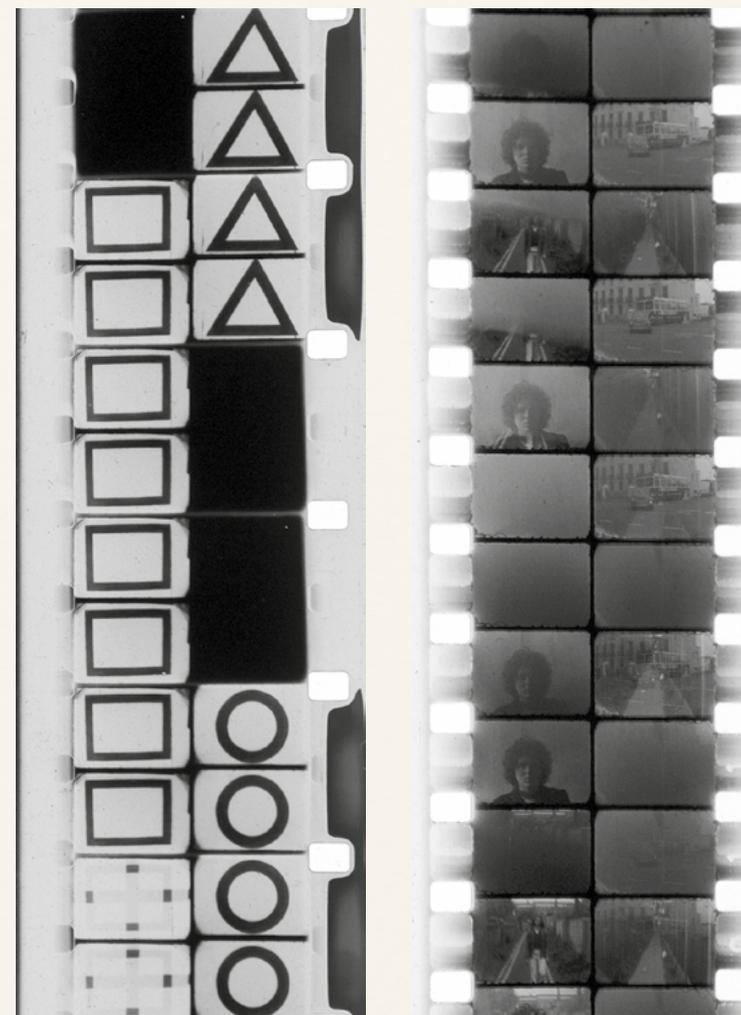
Last but not least, I have been fond since my childhood of everything moving and rhythmic in nature, 'nature cinema', the elements, the seasons, light and shadow.

It seems difficult to me to make a hierarchy of what is important for my filmmaking. Maybe it needs the complexity of all the different aspects nourishing my work: the visual, the touch, the gesture implying the body, my emotions, ideas and reflections. If all work together in the moment of experiencing and exploring a situation, a place, a figure, an action, a good film might come out.

At times I feel that it is also a gift. This is also true for finding my subjects when I have my camera with me and feel free to discover what I see around me. Usually I am surprised by something happening, moving me, provoking my interest and desire to make a film, looking through the viewfinder, looking for the right framing, and to sense a certain enthusiasm and necessity. It is often a rhythmic movement, the quality of light, a simultaneity of several visual events that inspire me to use the camera.

In your films I find a similar sensitivity and approach related to the visual arts and to art history, not only to the traditions of experimental film. You are probably less direct, more considerate of formal decisions constructing the image in space and time and in your editing. You always impress me with your analytic and theoretical strength. How do you see these connections?

NH — As a schoolboy, discovering Mondrian was important. I also loved Bonnard and my painting was heavily influenced by him in terms of the juxtapositions of colour, but also his spare touch, the way you can see through the paint to the canvas. I liked the idea of a scrubby mesh of brush marks, the light touch that's implied. Mondrian impressed me by his single-mindedness, his linear development, the careful pursuit of a narrow field explored in depth. I also liked the economy of means in his mature work,



though not so much the *Boogie-Woogie* period.

These impressions have fed into my filmmaking, at least insofar as I have tried to aim for an economy of means, and for things to be tied into the structure – I'm a classicist, not a Baroque person. (I was put off the Baroque and, *a fortiori*, the Rococo, by my art history teacher, for whom 15th Century Venetian painting was the ideal). In terms of structure, I realised early on that if one wasn't working with narrative, where story dictates a lot of the formal decisions, there had to be some other way of organising material.

In *Silver Street* (1974), which was my first properly edited film, I took some simple decisions: one indoor and one outdoor shot every hour, on the hour, from dawn to dusk. I decided on a set of repeating camera positions, with a mostly static camera, so as to focus on changes of light and other variations within the frame. I try to derive formal decisions from the morphology of the pro-filmic, so that there's some kind of logic operating. I think this is something we have in common. In films of yours, such as *Mädchen* (Girls, 1995) and *Flugzeuge II* (Aeroplanes 2, 2000), the camera tracks repeating actions or movements in a way that gives a strong sense of simultaneous image capture-formation and overall structuring through repetition: the repetitive structure is found in the repeating subject matter.

HF — Could you describe the importance of film as your medium rather than another and your way of finding your subjects?

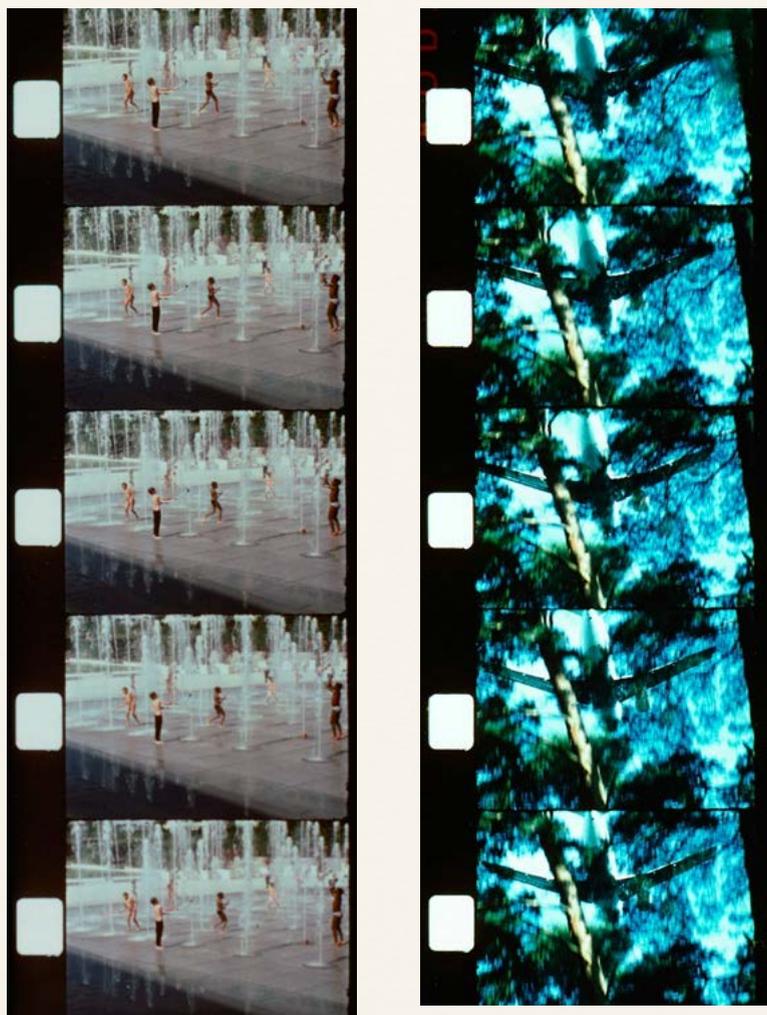
NH — Once I got to the Fine Art Department of Reading University as a painting student, I felt the burden of art history pressing down. At around the same time, I participated in a film project that one of my tutors, Ron Haselden, was running. I knew absolutely nothing about film, but I was able to draw on my technical knowledge of photography, as I had a little darkroom at home with a developing tank and a contact printer. Armed with this knowledge I made something quite ambitious in technical terms, re-filming 35mm slides, making double exposures with colour separations etc. It was all shot on a single roll of Kodachrome and it all came out more or less perfectly. That opened my eyes to an entirely new medium. I felt unburdened by history. At that stage I knew nothing about artists' film – but then had to decide how to proceed with my first proper film, i.e. one made self-consciously.

I saw some work by the late English filmmaker David Crosswaite, made on un-split Standard 8 film, which yields four images within the 16mm frame when it's not split for 8mm projection, so for my next two films, *Rhythm 1* and *Rhythm II* (1974) I used the same kind of Standard 8 stock, deploying

a combination of dice-throws to determine shot length, and a permutational system, based on stasis and movement of camera and subject, to generate decisions respectively. This approach was influenced by talks given by some of the Systems artists at Reading, specifically Malcolm Hughes, who used complex numerical processes to determine the forms of his abstract reliefs. At this point I wasn't so aware of working with time *per se*, but I was conscious of pace and rhythm. I learned this in the editing of *Silver Street*, where I became aware that one is juggling with the balance between image and duration: what are the criteria by which one determines the length of a shot? Rhythm comes out of that juggling process. One also learns that duration is as substantial in this context as the image: it becomes a material component of the work.

The rhythms of *Silver Street* were partly determined by the absence of proper editing facilities at the college: all we had was a projector and a splicer, so I was having to project my camera original then try to make decisions as I was watching. I soon gave up on this and decided to simply count seconds in my head then translate that into frames. This accounts for the rhythmic quality. This experience got me thinking about the degree to which the technology determines the outcome, something which has animated my interest in film ever since. I think what I found, and find, challenging about film, is how to deal with the intractability of the pro-filmic. A painting is created *ex nihilo*, but with film one is already confronted with a scene, space etc., potential material, pre-formed. Then one has to decide how to manage and channel what's there. One is always working with found material in this sense, although it's not material until it's recorded. This often feels like a *fait accompli*, but that's what's exciting about film. Duration and rhythm are subsequent ways of shaping the material. I always found this gave me relief from the anxiety of trying to make a photograph, where everything is done there and then: it's a do-or-die momentary event. It also relieved me of the immense difficulty of creating form from scratch, as a painter has to do.

I find my subjects through the medium though. They are there potentially but they don't precede it, rather it's a process of something like creative discovery, rather in the way you find things by looking through the viewfinder, and operating the camera while looking, as you said before, but the discovery is also formative, through the act of framing. Recently I have decided to more or less abandon editing and simply present what comes out of the filming process. Editing seems too much to involve arranging



things according to intuitive aesthetic decisions, whereas increasingly I'm interested in things that may not look very pleasing but which, rather, allow the work to escape my grasp. At the same time, with some of the new work I am intensively re-working material according to a rigid procedure, however this too is in the service of generating the unexpected, even if that seems paradoxical.

HF — How do you prefer presenting your work?

NH — The single screen work is best seen on the best possible projector in a good auditorium that's as dark as possible. The projection at Media City Festival, in Windsor, Ontario, which is supplied by James Bond from Chicago, with his amazing Kodak 50 projectors, is superb, almost too forensic: one sees so much detail in the image that wouldn't otherwise be visible. I have also made a few gallery installations that are designed to work in situations where I don't have control of the light levels. The most recent such piece, *Homage Schwarz Weiss Grau (1930)*, which was made for a Bauhaus 100 year anniversary show in 2019, uses the white walls of the gallery as the grey component, while the white component is the areas illuminated by the projector lamp and the black components are the black areas of the film frame, as well as two pieces of black paper stuck to the wall, onto which the image is projected.

HF — You are teaching film, programming and writing on film. How does this inform your work? Is there sometimes a conflict?

NH — Recently I was asked to give a lecture to 1st year Fine Art students on 'The Cinematic'. I started with the Lumière brothers, then showed clips from Robert Paul, D.W. Griffith, John Huston, Hitchcock, Michael Powell and Antonioni, but I also added a critique of the concept and so finished by showing slides of para-cinematic works by Tony Conrad, Anthony McCall and Cathy Rogers as a counter-blast. This was my way of dealing with a conflict. I felt a conflict more strongly, however, when I worked in cutting rooms at the BBC in the 1980s, when they still had 120 16mm editing rooms. I was very careful not to let the working processes there influence my own methods. It starts to feel strange when you're surrounded by people who accept unquestioningly the ethos of the corporation and have a very rigidly instrumental understanding of media, so I kept my mouth shut most of the time, though there were sympathetic characters working there too.

Can you elaborate on the structuring process you're working with when you shoot a film, and say something about how you find your subjects, and can you also say something about how the work has evolved and talk a bit about recent films?

HF — I discover and come across my subject when I am free to stroll with my camera. Often, I feel attracted by a rhythmic movement or light and shadow shaping and transforming reality. I have to find out immediately if there is a chance to respond cinematically to my observations. Looking through the viewfinder, I try to understand what I see and sense, and to question my interest before thinking about the possibilities to shoot a film corresponding to my vision.

Some examples: When I saw girls in nice little dresses running from one tree to another in a park in Paris, I decided to participate with my camera following their fast movements with short and very short cuts, thus recreating the dynamics of the game (*Mädchen*). In *Brunnen* (Fountain, 2000), boys 'misuse' hockey sticks, striking water fountains and performing an amazing choreography in a fountain. I looked for a viewpoint that conveyed the complexity of many water fountains going up and down rhythmically, of the boys dancing with their hockey sticks and other children moving in the water landscape. I decided to film this scene continuously at 24fps, in slow-motion slightly (Super8 normally runs at 18fps). Sometimes I return to a place, waiting for better weather and light conditions, or I explore the subject in order to be sure whether I want to make a film or not. It took me quite a time to experience the right moment when light and shadow, a breeze, a blue sky and white clouds inspired me to shoot *Umlauftank* (Circulation Tank, 2017), an amazing pink and blue industrial building at the Landwehrkanal in Berlin. There are some places and subjects I like to return to once in a while and make a new film. I have a series of *Mona Lisa* films for example, showing visitors taking photos, videos and selfies in front of the famous painting; a series of films of birds flying around in a big aviary; and a series of films of a persimmon tree without leaves, whose ripe fruit birds devour in one day.

For each individual film I try to find the appropriate form depending on what I wish to make visible and express. I am very much interested in creating complex images, paying attention to layers (foreground, middle-ground, background), so that every square centimetre tends to be alive. Structuring time through pace and rhythm is equally important.

It is challenging to catch the moment, to make a film edited in-camera, never losing contact with the subject and my vision of the film. I love the concentration and intensity while creating a film and easily forget about real time and reality. It is a trance-like state of mind, yet I am aware of

what I see, sense, feel, think, imagine and decide while handling the camera. There is always a risk of failure I have to cope with. In this kind of direct filmmaking I mean to create the film not only chronologically in the camera, but above all in my imagination. Three minutes of film (the approximate length of a Super 8 roll) might seem to be very short, but filming shot-by-shot, in one gesture, can take a long time. When I project and see a film for the first time it is the first time that it exists outside of my mind. This can be a dramatic moment if I feel a difference between the inner film I remember and the film outside of me. Sometimes it takes time to accept the 'real thing' and its qualities before showing a film.

NH — Can you talk about how the work has evolved and say something about recent work?

HF — My skills and experiences, my knowledge and reflections concerning film and filmmaking certainly have evolved, but I wonder how far this is true for my work. On the one hand there is a continuity related to serendipity, in-situ filming, in-camera editing and the way I show my films. The essence of what inspires me and why I love the medium is still the same. I try to avoid routine and mannerism and to film with the freshness of a first, and the intensity of a last, encounter.

But I do not shoot as much as I used to. I don't feel as light-hearted about filming since film stock, developing and prints have become so expensive. Worrying about a possible failure intensifies all the questions concerning my inspiration, vision, ideas and the necessity of making a film. Fortunately, once I sense the desire to shoot I manage to overcome my doubts and feel free to film. My trance-like state of mind while filming has probably become more intense, my framing is richer in variations and my approach to structuring time more complex. What has certainly evolved is the growing of body of my work (visible in my catalogue raisonné on my website: <http://helgafanderl.com/>) and the variety of my programmes. Curating my own films is essential. Meanwhile, I combine composed reels of Super 8 prints and 16mm blow-ups, so that the origin of the bigger format from S8 becomes transparent. With the help of grants I have also had



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16mm inter-negatives and prints made from S8 reversal originals, because there is no longer a print stock for S8 contact prints.

From the very beginning my screenings have had a kind of performative character (they are based on a unique and ephemeral programme, and the projector is visible and audible because I set it up in the auditorium). This practice evolved. Whenever I have had the chance to invest in an interesting space, which is not made for showing films, I have enjoyed building a cinema for presenting my work. Installations and exhibitions became an extension of working with my films.

Our approach to filmmaking is very personal and inspired by aesthetic and artistic concerns and an awareness of form. In a time where the 'political' and 'political correctness' in the arts seem to prevail, I wonder how you feel about not joining in with the 'discourse'. I rarely see political work which is convincing as an artwork, opening my mind and inspiring me. I think that good political art, or film, is most difficult to make. I wish I could, because there are so many threatening problems in the world and we can do so little to resolve them as individuals. Although I am very political in my thinking, and commitment as a (world) citizen (and believe that you are too), my filmmaking is the expression of something different, that is maybe deeper and related to voices in artistic practices and concerns throughout history. I felt guilty, for a long time, to concentrate, in my films, on my personal vision of moments in real life that touch and enchant me with their beauty and liveliness. And I still wonder whether they can give something to the world. Some friends tell me that one can consider my filmmaking as 'political' in another sense, not working for the entertainment machine and profit, being so independent and free. How do you feel about these questions?

NH — These debates about politics and art have always gone on and always will. When I was a student I had periods of feeling guilty about not making socially responsive work, but I soon realised that since there will always be burning political issues to address, if all artists did that Art would wither away and exist only to serve as propaganda or to illustrate and explain political problems that have nothing to do with the proper concerns of art.

The late writer Michael O'Pray, whose formation was as a working-class communist activist, used to dismiss the so-called political art of the day – broadly the 1980s, the Thatcher era – as 'bad faith' art. For him it was work

that was made by people who felt that was what they ought to be doing, not what they truly wanted to make or were excited by. In other words, it was inauthentic. This is a separate question to the one of whether artists are competent to make useful political films. In the 1970s, groups like Cinema Action dedicated themselves to collaborating with groups of people involved in specific struggles. In immersing themselves in the lives of these people and their problems, they put themselves in a precarious situation, eking out a marginal existence far from the artworld and its temptations.

Why would the artworld, with its big money and poor employment practices, care about the political struggles of the poor? So-called 'political art' that's made for the artworld seems like a self-defeating project to me. If you want to get involved in political struggles, become an activist. Art is the place where new forms of visual thinking are discovered and forged through working with materials. The creative thinking that the experience of this work can generate is liberating. This connects to your last point about not working for the entertainment machine. Practices such as your showing work in your studio to an invited audience constitutes a form of resistance to consumer culture. It is also a genuinely 'relational' practice, unlike a lot of the more gimmicky, high-profile relational work, since the discussion is around a shared aesthetic object that exists as a focal point for experience and discussion.