

Living in the World Films by Helga Fanderl

Thursday, September 22 at 7:00 pm — San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Helga Fanderl is a sensitive poet who works with cinema. Her use of the medium is straight and simple. The films, mostly edited in the camera, make me sometimes think of the work of Emily Dickinson. (Peter Kubelka)

Working with film since the late 1980s—exclusively in Super-8mm—the German-born and Paris-based artist Helga Fanderl is a master of cinematic duration and the in-camera edit, each of her over 700 short films a small epiphany of graphic composition and poetic form. As if taking cues from the latent lyricism discoverable at the margins of certain “structuralist” works—including films of Gehr, Snow, Stark and Warhol—Fanderl’s compact and formal works (which resemble superficially travelogues and portraits) are subtle revelations of vibrant energy and light embodied in (and flowing through) the surfaces of the physical world. (Steve Polta)

Films (2000-2009)

Super-8mm: *Mona Lisa*; *Fontaine Médicis*; *Voliere (Aviary)*; *Passanten (Passers-by)*; *Feuerwerk (Fireworks)*; *Zora schaukelt (Swinging Zora)*; *Pflanzen (Plants)*; *Pfosten im Fluß (Piles in a River)*; *Güterzüge (Freight Trains)*; *Kakibaum im Winter (Persimmon Tree in Winter)*

16mm: *Spiegelung (Reflections)*; *Innenhof (Courtyard)*; *Grauer Reiher II (Grey Heron II)*; *Drei Midtown-Skizzen (Three Midtown Sketches)*; *Zelte am Kanal (Tents on a Canal)*; *Karpfen in Farbe schwimmend (Carp Swimming in Colour)*; *Grüner Ballon (Green Balloon)*; *Kettenkarussell (Carousel)*; *Netzwerfer (Throwing the Net)*; *Unter den Seerosen (Under the Water Lilies)*; *Vögel am Checkpoint Charlie (Birds at Checkpoint Charlie)*; *Ostberlin (East Berlin)*; *Tunnel*; *Aus dem Empire State Building (From the Empire State Building)*; *Tortelloni*; *Wilde Wasser (Wild Waters)*; *Eisbär (Polar Bear)*

...the Mona Lisa, photographed and videotaped; a portrait of a Renaissance fountain; the camera catching birds flying under the dome of an aviary, following their restricted flight; rhythms of street scenes through grass and flowers; fireworks rising, exploding and falling behind a bridge crossed by a subway; the pleasure of a little girl in a red dress swinging in the air; close-ups of plants on a terrace creating rhymes of colours, structures and light; enigmatic ruins in the waters of the Hudson River; freight trains describing a curve and entering a channel, moving sculptures in time and space; evocation of luminous orange-red fruit in a bare tree offering a feast for birds; a garden and its visitors reflected in water whose surface is moved by fishes and raindrops; leaves of a banana tree swaying in front of a fresco; a gray heron attentively hunting; a closing gate protected by barbed wire; plants and an apple tree in the wind behind a fence; tents along a canal; fishes swimming through reflected colors; children and adults playing with a balloon; a carousel describing curves; a fisherman throwing his net; Japanese carp appearing and disappearing between water lilies; birds appearing and disappearing above roofs; glimpses of a stormy evening in autumn in East Berlin; a rhythmic ride through the light and dark of a tunnel; a cityscape of snow-covered water towers and buildings; making tortellinis like making sculptures; streaming water coming out of and vanishing into black; a polar bear swimming back and forth...

These films give presence to moments and fragments of the world. They are about brief events finding form and rhythm, create a kind of music for the senses. Immediate small gestures point to what one can see when the mind is awake. Each film is edited in the camera and completed in itself, yet each evokes other events and fragments. The body of my work is like a network where each film reflects ad infinitum all the others.

— Helga Fanderl

Tonight's screening is dedicated to the memory of Robert Breer (1926–2011)

from “Layers and Lattices: The Super-8 Films of Helga Fanderl” by Nicolas Hamlyn

Helga Fanderl is one of a tiny number of filmmakers making serious formal innovations with Super-8. She came to filmmaking after studying European literature, having wanted to be a poet, but found writing a difficult and uncongenial medium. She was introduced to film in the mid-1980s through a Super-8 workshop in Frankfurt, organized by Urs Breitenstein, a former pupil of Peter Kubelka. She went on to study with Kubelka, informally at first, then formally at the Frankfurt Städelschule. She subsequently studied at Cooper Union in New York with Robert Breer. Since the mid-1980s she has completed over 600 short films. Most of them consist of a single roll of Super-8, lasting around three minutes, but many are shorter, and some but a single shot of a few seconds duration.

In Fanderl’s work a number of contrasting elements—formal, spatial, colouristic, graphic and performative—co-exist in productive tension with each other, often pulling one’s attention in opposing directions. Equally, Fanderl will change the conceptual register within a single film by a shift of strategy. This is achieved by, for example, foregrounding graphic connections over representational stability, or reducing information to allow the kinetic to override illusory space. The films thereby create a self-consciously active, gestalt-forming viewer for what often appear, at first, to be straightforwardly observational films, which in an important sense they are, since each one strongly conveys the genius loci in which it is made. Furthermore humans and animals are very important for the way in which they both animate and inform the formal strategies and eventual structures of these scenarios.

[...] almost all her films are edited in-camera [...]: mistakes are accepted, although in this context they are no longer mistakes, since everything that is made, as it is made, becomes part of the work. [...] The one or two frame breaks between shots, and the resulting flash frames, become central motifs, both in the articulation of rhythm and in the play and disturbance of light and movement, continuity and discontinuity. All the films are silent.

[The films] are characterized by their brevity, a dance-like motility and lightness of touch, combined with an improvisatory, yet exploratory purpose. Indeed, [many] may be compared to small-group, free musical improvisation, in which a successful interplay of instrumental voices depends on the musicians’ ability both to play and listen at the same time [...]: “learning to pay attention to the pace, to the correspondence between the subject matter, my interest and feeling and the timing” as Fanderl [...] puts it in relation to her filmic procedures. She has honed her ability to look and structure simultaneously—to anticipate—resulting in a structuring process, rather than structure in the sense of predetermined forms.

[...] Fanderl’s willingness to surrender to the particular dynamics of the situation in which she finds herself opens up her practice to otherwise unavailable possibilities. In some ways her stance exemplifies what most artists discover in the process of making, which is to allow the work’s own momentum to pull them with it, so that there is always a margin of doubt, of things to be discovered and surprised by, before the conscious awareness of the contents of this margin of doubt permits retrospective theoretical and strategic consolidation to take place. This is common among painters, whose activity is typified by a minute, hyper-sensitive feedback process in which decisions can be acted upon impulsively and immediately, then just as quickly adjusted, as necessary. But it is much more rare among filmmakers, for whom the kind of improvisatory activity undertaken by painters and musicians is risky, because expensive or permanent: every mark made by light on celluloid is ineradicable. This is why post-production is of key importance for most filmmakers. Indeed, on this view, the division between “production” and “post-production” is questionable, insofar as the shaping that takes place in post-production can entirely negate the outcome envisaged at the production stage.

Because there is no editing in Fanderl’s films they are an exact record of the production process. One might be tempted to compare them to Stan Brakhage’s films, in the sense of the latter conceived of as a kind of record of a performance for and with hand-held camera, but Brakhage’s films invariably have a sense of teleology about them, a sense that he is either looking for something he knows is already there, waiting to be embodied, or he is making things happen, seeking things as ends in a controlled manner that are then fortified in post-production. Fanderl’s films, by contrast, are more open to incident, to the fortuitous and unexpected [...]. What is fascinating about many of her films is precisely a sense of the undirected that they embody. Fanderl’s films thus reveal an ethical position in which a commitment to exploration encounters the unavoidable facts of filmmaking: the transformative, interventional agency of the cinematic apparatus, which she tempers and subjects to examination precisely through a commitment to undirectedness.