

Film Talks: 15 Conversations on Experimental Cinema

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Contents

- 9 Back and Forth
Simon Payne / Andrew Vallance
- 17 Speaking Of...
Jonathan Walley
- 25 Ute Aurand / Nick Collins
Places and Portraits
- 45 Jenny Baines / Bea Haut
Misbehaving Materials
- 63 Amy Dickson / Annabel Nicolson
Letters on Light
- 85 Karel Doing / Francisca Duran
Ecology, Ethics and the
Unintelligible
- 105 Helga Fanderl / Nicky Hamlyn
Discovering the Pro-filmic
- 121 Neil Henderson / Andrew Vallance
The Wind in the Trees
- 143 Jasleen Kaur / Alia Syed
Staring at the Artex
- 163 Malcolm Le Grice / Chris Welsby
Landscape, Science and Uncertainty
- 185 Lynn Loo / Guy Sherwin
Working Together in Expanded Cinema
- 205 Bruce McClure / Greg Pope
Skipping the Clock Back /
it goes without saying

Contents

- 223 Jennifer Nightingale / Rose Lowder
Charts, Frames and Other Insights
- 241 Jayne Parker / Simon Payne
Scores and Structures
- 259 William Raban / John Smith
Made in London
- 281 Lis Rhodes / Aura Satz
Voice Has Time Within It
- 299 Cathy Rogers / Vicky Smith
Touching with the Eye

Ute Aurand /
Nick Collins

Places and Portraits

Ute Aurand studied filmmaking at the Deutsche Film und Fernsehakademie, Berlin, in the early 1980s. Since then she has produced a distinctive body of work which often involves intimate portraits and improvised, impressionistic means of documenting special events and places. She has sometimes filmed her subjects over the course of several years, which make her films a testament to personal journeys. Aurand has also actively promoted other female filmmakers through curatorial initiatives, such as *Filmarbeiterinnen-Abend* (1990–95) and the publication *Women Make History: 25 Years of Women Students at the DFFB with Maria Lang*.

Nick Collins predominately works with 8mm and 16mm film. He studied history at the University of Cambridge and later enrolled on the influential Film Studies diploma at The Slade School of Art. His early interests were in photography and in the mid 1970s he began making films, which led him to discover the London Filmmakers' Co-op. His work is observational and often very concise, sometimes being issued as clusters or series. Collins's eye for natural phenomena makes for lyrical films that combine intuitive systems for shooting with a preoccupation with the traces of history that can be found in landscapes and locations that span the domestic to the sacred.

Nick Collins — I've been greatly struck by a number of aspects of your filmmaking, but I've been thinking first that it's among the most spontaneous-feeling work that I know.

The way the camera is used – although the apparent or actual spontaneity of the camerawork may then be built into longer sequences on the editing table – makes the filming visibly one aspect of the relationships you have with the subjects of the films, and with the situations within which the films are made. I imagine that as with most relationships and friendships, meeting-up is something which happens from time to time, either regularly or less so, and that each meeting is in some way different. The films convey this in different ways in relation to different occasions. The way you use the camera matches the way in which what happens in life is half-planned and half-contingent. As you remark in an interview that I recently read: life is like a train ride, you cannot grab everything, every image, just as in life (I paraphrase). So the real event, whether it takes place over an hour, a morning or an afternoon, and so on, always exceeds the representation. The process of filming is both a record of the time and the actions that create the film (it's not hidden, as in much fiction filmmaking).

I was most aware of the interpretative aspect of your filming in *Phillip's 60. Geburtstag* [Phillip's 60th Birthday] (2014), where the film is both a representation of a party (everyone's memory of any party is always unique and different to that of anyone else) and also much more. Even though I can't speak or understand more than a very little German, I see the film as a portrait – as often with your work it is celebratory – of a family across the generations but at a particular moment. It also has an implied melancholy. Some of those pictured are very old, and probably don't have many years left, while the very young are often oblivious to this, where the celebration is concerned. The film has a sense of a family as something which holds together different times, and which itself also moves through time. I noticed the distinct darkening of tone that takes place through the images of the graveyard, church and church-paintings, and a literal darkening of the image itself in the second half of the film. The film raised interesting questions for me around making the private public. Do you see viewers in the distant future looking at your films, and seeing them as representative of a time and place? What is the viewer's place in relation to the relationship between the filmmaker and those who appear in the films? Perhaps this film spoke to me particularly because I'm often aware that one thing I'm doing in

my filmmaking is recording or fixing passages of time. I sometimes wonder why I feel the need to do that, as opposed to just inhabiting each day as it happens. Is it a perfecting of everyday experience, a distillation from it, the making of an object which derives from direct visual and/or auditory experience?

I'm imagining that you already know most of the subjects of the films very well, and portraiture is dominant within your filmmaking. The idea of the gift – of a film as a gift to its subject – seems to mesh with this. It's a lovely idea and one with a long history within art. It is particularly visible in *Paulina* (2011), where the film is both a gift at a particular moment and a celebration of a relative, where the diachronic (stages in growing-up) is encompassed within the duration of a short film. Different times in the subject's life are linked by similar actions that are performed years apart. I liked the way those links were used within the film, in a way which contributed to the portrait and to the structure. That strand of celebration seems to be an important aspect of your work, often a celebration of the lives of your subjects, but also of the camera and of the process of filmmaking. I'm thinking of various things: the silent visual rhythms which are a pleasure in themselves when the viewer becomes aware of them, but also the celebration of both the passage of time and of moments brought into relationship with each other.

I saw *To Be Here* (2013) from this angle too, though it is in some ways rather different from others of your films I've seen. The implications of the title encompass a huge range, between the experiences of the women students in the present who appear in the film, on what looks like a single beautiful day, the evocation of the history of Mount Holyoke College, with photographs of former students, and the presence of the filmmaker and her particular choices at the moment of filming. Melancholy seems to be present here too.

Sometimes the process of filming and the relationship of the camera to subject is explicitly and interestingly questioned. In *Sakura, Sakura* (2015), in the second half of the film, portraiture is playfully considered by way of the camera emerging into the field of view of the mirror and disappearing again, the quizzical look of the portrait's subject, their blinking, which suggests the action of the shutter, and the play with the line between the lens of the camera and the eye of the subject. This is an exciting and very intense piece of filmmaking, so the outdoor shots at the end come as a relief!

Ute Aurand — I had already filmed my friend Philipp's 40th and 50th birthdays, first as a present for him, but when I saw the 60th birthday footage I wanted to make it public or saw the possibility that it could be interesting also for others.

Generally, as soon as I film, the connection with a potential spectator is there. It doesn't matter if the footage will never be used, which I often decide much later, but in the moment of filming there is the hope that I can transform something from within me to others.

The viewer's place in relation to the filmmaker and those who appear in the films depends very much on who the viewer is and how he or she finds something for themselves in the films. My relationship to the person I'm filming makes the film possible, it is also the vehicle, but not the main reason, to make the film. With the portraits I wish to share a view of growing up, or qualities of personality, or the beauty and fragility of life through this one person.

To answer your question about why we are filming and not just BEING, there must be a need for each of us, different needs, but something which wants to speak to the world through images. I feel strongly the movement from the inside to the outside. I see and feel that also very strongly in your films, which communicate 100% visually, but I 'hear' you in the images. That's the mystery of communication through film. That's what I love so much in seeing our kind of filmmaking.

Now here are some of my impressions after, or while, watching some of your strong short films:

I am not sure if it is your latest film, but I liked a lot your digital film *Untitled (moiré in Bari)* (2019). I have a weakness for patterns and the way you play with the forms by going very close, then back and then close again, before retreating to give a more realistic view and finally the open, surrounding view. I also like how you use the possibilities of digital close-ups, slow-motion and sound. But it is a study, like all your other works I've seen so far. I see your films as studies that allow the viewer an insight in your interests and searches. I become a witness of your filming. That's very rare. The present moment of filming is still there. It is as if I am witnessing your filming even though it has already taken place. I feel your decisions very clearly. What you film and how you film merges together and behind it all is the filmmaker with his interests and decisions.

I imagine possible images which you don't film. For example, your framing of the river in *Shanghai Notebook* (2012/2018) hints at what is

outside the image. Your attraction to shadows is the incarnation of this relation between the visible and invisible images, because the shadow belongs to the unseen object which you often don't show.

I am curious to hear a bit about your process of filming, how you 'find' your images, how you allow yourself to make a kind of search visible.

I could say the films are loose, but you hold them together with your strong interest and curiosity, your love of what you discover and film. It's a very positive feeling that I receive from your small clusters of often silent images, which like each others company!

I have started watching your earlier films, which I find much more constructed, edited, and concentrated on what happens in the images rather than reaching out like the later ones. I see much more interest in the image itself. Does this make sense to you?

Which was your very first film?

NC — About *Untitled (moiré in Bari)*: sometimes I think I do better when I'm trying less hard. The more effort, the more static the films sometimes become. This little piece was shot on my iPhone (perhaps one of my first steps towards being less addicted to Super8 and 16mm film) in about half an hour and edited on an iPad on the ferry between Bari and Patras. It's so nice to work that way! I'm interested in what you said about 'the present moment of filming still being there'. It's true of this little piece, but in many of my films it gets changed by the editing process, however much that may have its virtues. The moment of filming is always there in your films, and the viewer very often feels it in a very tactile or musical way. (I think this is intensified for a viewer who is used to the Bolex camera.) You feel directly the eye and mind behind the camera, and the presence of the filmmaker moving around the room/space. The presence of the filmmaker in that physical way, within the film, takes the viewer away from a world which is just images. It contains the relationship between the filmmaker and the subject, and the filming has different emotional qualities at different times.

I certainly agree that my films are studies. They are studies of the places which appear in them but also of the ways shots can be made into a film. The locations I film have often been places I've known for a long time. Gradually the idea that a place might have a film in it arises. For example, with *Across the Valley* (2006), I'd been sitting and looking at that view for around ten years. I became interested in time – days and seasons coming and going – and in making a film from a single vantage point, although I

don't stick to it too closely. For the viewer, shots in a film appear to take their place on screen one after another. The remainder of the film at any point is always ahead, but new shots mix with images already seen. I had this idea that from the point of the film, each shot appears somehow from behind the one before. The film is a complete object and each shot is already latent in the screen. *Across the Valley* plays with this idea by referring back and forward across the time that is represented within it. For a lot of the time my main interest has been in construction and form. I think I've got more relaxed recently though, and have come to value filming at home, on the spur of the moment, when I feel like it and when the light is good. And I am coming to see that, as you say, for the viewer to feel the filmmaker's interest and curiosity can be enlivening!

One fundamental distinction seems to me to be between filming hand-held and filming with a tripod, and in a sense I think I've never been able to choose definitively between one and the other. Studying in the late 1970s, on the one hand there was Stan Brakhage (I don't think I was very aware of Marie Menken, though I became so later, nor Jonas Mekas, most of whose films I still haven't seen). On the other hand, there were the films of Straub and Huillet, who were very important for me, especially *History Lessons* (1972) and *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1968). I became aware that you could have sequences which were structured through successive camera positions in a location or even across locations, but with long takes so that the image etched itself into the viewer's consciousness and had that sense of duration. Ozu was also particularly important, especially for the composition, the seeing – in what Noël Burch called 'pillow shots' – and for the sense of time both elapsing and suspended. Sometimes I want machine-vision, which combined with composition and a little movement within the image can hold the viewer in a particular way. Sometimes I want camera movement, which can be expressive and convey subjectivity differently.

I really like what you say about visible and invisible images, and shadows from off-screen bringing in invisible images. The invisible is either what appears to be (or is) absent; or it's a presence that isn't directly visible. I really feel that an absence is as strong an entity (or thing) as a presence, a bit like the negative space around objects in a painting. Shadows are often indices of absent objects and have a shape. They are always an absence of light. Like absence and presence, filming this and not that seems fundamental to me, and one of the reasons why 16mm filmmaking is so

great. It forces the maker to choose (I need to be forced!).

In your new film *Rushing Green with Horses* (2019), which I greatly enjoyed, each sequence has its emotional quality, or tone, that is achieved through image and sound, but is not confined by it. It is something not just visual, or even visual and auditory. The whole is so much more than the sum of the parts, and something which goes beyond them. Some sequences seem to completely capture a particular moment, event or time (for example the sequence where your partner Robert Beavers eats the toast). But there is also 'diachronic' portraiture (for example in the section showing your godchild Paulina, who features in another film from 2011) and the whole film is full of experimentation with combinations of sound and image. I was particularly struck by the sequence with the gothic church buildings and the birdsong – one very heavy and the other very light. Your use of sound and music is often very elegiac. I'm thinking of the two adjacent sequences that have a glockenspiel(?) and then funereal church bells on the soundtrack, which create a very specific emotional transition. The whole film seems to celebrate life lived, and to share with us your milieu, but also at the same time to be a kind of memento mori. If, in one sense, all we really have is time, you are showing us what it is to treasure time, so celebrations feature a lot, but sometimes the films turn to quiet contemplation. Little things, glimpsed either 'on the fly', like the two horses and riders seen from a train window (the source of the film's title?), or in a more extended way, have a significance out of proportion to their duration in the film.

The opening of the film is beautiful, combining the rhythms of the dance that we see and of the filming. This is repeated and varied in the second sequence where the rhythm of the cutting and of the spoken poem interact. There is the window in the old building, which is almost like a screen. Both sequences function as an introduction to the film as a whole. I was also interested in the way in which the fast cutting sometimes creates immediacy and sometimes distance for the viewer, as does the alternation of sound with silence. It also made me think about how we see, which is different in the more active and the more contemplative sequences. It also made me think about how, as you've said, the experience of an event is always selective. I also like very much how you use the full range of what the camera can do, especially your use of out-of-focus imagery.

UA — Thank you for your recent 'chapter' and your words about *Rushing Green with Horses* which are very alert. Yes, the title came from this very

brief glimpse of horses seen on a train ride in southern Germany.

I always film with a handheld camera as an extension of my body. It allows me to move towards or away from what I film. I need the freedom of moving while filming. Your early interest in Straub/Huillet felt surprising at first, but I see your conscious reflection on time and movement. It is always interesting to know which filmmakers were, or are, important for us! I liked the early Ulrike Ottinger. Jonas Mekas's *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972) was also very important for me.

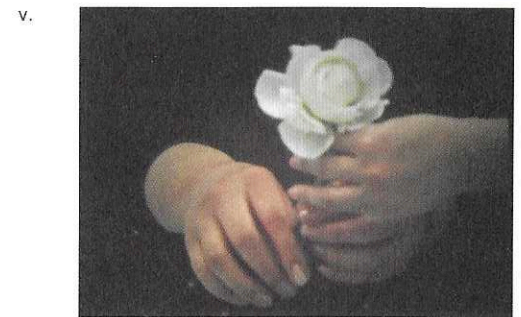
What caught my attention today, when watching your films, is your subtle surrealist side, especially in the earlier films. But even in *Across the Valley*, some of your unusual framings of the chairs, or the sudden appearance of the girl who is only seen in parts, have a surrealist quality which opens another level of communication. There is a playfulness or psychological touch, which doesn't stay; it just blows through your imagery and that's very nice.

In the early black and white films, I felt it strongly, but more in the sense of mystery. In *Looking In and Out (A Winter Diary)* (1986) or *Self-Portrait* (1983) and even in your early film *After the Music by François Couperin* (1978/79) there is a mysterious quality in the films, maybe that of a young filmmaker or a young person in general. The conceptual hides these qualities but they want to find their place too! In *Untitled (Caribbean Garden)* (2019) I feel the large banana leaves move in such a way that they become personalities.

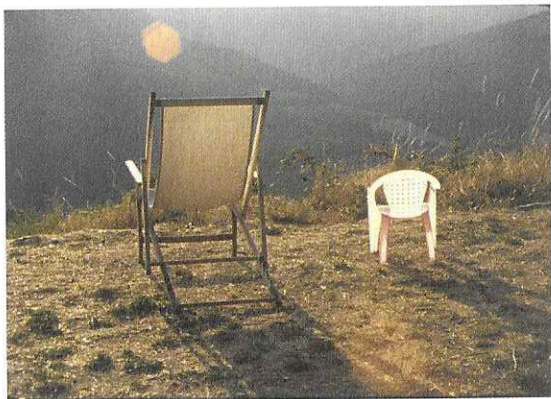
I will send you my first film because it is in this line...

NC — The way you use the camera as an extension of the body works so well in relation to the people in your films, that freedom of movement, back and forth and around.

I think that I'm always thinking of the screen, and working towards that end. I almost never film unless with a specific film in mind. I feel the screen is a vision which hovers in space, a modern fetish as it's characterized in Rachel Moore's book *Savage Theory*. It is something which, in a way, takes the place of some kinds of religious experience, at least when experienced collectively in a cinema. I think a lot about the 'internal balance of time' within a film, which Ernie Gehr mentioned in his 'Film is...' statement in 1971. As for surrealism (with a small s), I agree that *Looking In and Out* has that quality. There were all sorts of things that might have made their way into that film, which were even more so. I think of that aspect more as a way



vi.



vii.



viii.



ix.



x.



of 'making strange' and it's very much to do with camera angles (another notable Straub/Huillet thing), with looking at a place and composition. I like your idea that something psychological can 'blow through' the imagery.

Last night I watched your *Four Diamonds* (2016), which is a really beautiful film. I liked its sense of conciseness, and the way it contains great contrasts within the small number of elements. So much in just four minutes! Also the simple way you reveal how you come to be there, at Mount Holyoke College. The conversation on the soundtrack places you within the film in a different sense to your camerawork. The interior footage of the women playing cards, with its concentration and darkness, sits so perfectly with the footage that follows, which has a different kind of intensity. I was left thinking that the movement within your filming and the way you use the Bolex camera, in short bursts, is very much a mechanism for creating intensity and energy within the footage you film. The word should probably be 'intensities' in the plural, as I am aware that exactly how you film varies from film to film and within individual films too, in relation to the subject. Your relationship to the camera seems very much like playing a musical instrument. The use of those tiny moments where you start the camera for just a frame or two, often in between longer (but usually still very short) shots determines the character that the sequences have. What determines the detail of the way you film? Is it largely intuitive, responding to the precise situation, or more pre-planned? Watching *In die Erde gebaut* [Building Under Ground] (2008) I was reminded that along with the camerawork I've just mentioned, there are also passages which involve montage in the more traditional sense, for example the sequence with the Hindu priest and the statue of Ganesha. There are really a great range of ways of filming.

UA — Yes, my filmmaking is very much intuitive and I am responding spontaneously to the person or place or situation I am in. For example, in *Four Diamonds* I just happened to see the ladies playing cards at the Guest House of Mount Holyoke College where they meet once a month. When I passed by the room I asked if I could film, and I did, but not for too long, because my filmmaking disturbed their game. Usually they don't talk while playing, but they did for me, because I had no clue about this game. I filmed the ocean earlier, on a rough winter day, just one reel without knowing for which film. Often I put material in my 'archive' and it has to wait until it finds its way into a film.

The material for *Four Diamonds*, *Sakura* and *A Walk / Im Park / ZOUZ* (2008), didn't find a place in longer films, so I made them into short films. *Sakura*, *Sakura* uses footage of the two ladies who I liked very much but didn't make it into the the long related film *Junge Kiefern* [Young Pines] from 2011. *Four Diamonds* was edited with footage I originally filmed in the context of material for *To Be Here*, in 2012, in the US. *Im Park* is edited with footage I didn't use for *In die Erde gebaut*.

For *In die Erde gebaut* I decided to go to Zurich every six weeks for filming, so it is my most planned film in a way. *India* (2005), *Young Pines* and *To Be Here* (2013) are my country trilogy and they are not really planned, but they were filmed in the special time frame when I visited the country. My film school films like *Schweigend ins Gespräch vertieft* [Deeply Absorbed in Silent Conversation] (1980) were all prepared in a way ... and edited over long periods.

I like your film *Rack* (2018), and that you allow it to stand alone even though it is so short! I find it interesting how you balance the controlled framing and decisions about what you want to film with your spontaneous sense of just coming to see and film! When I watch your films, I feel more the spontaneity than the sense of planning, but that may be because of my own way of filming. I can't imagine how to think things out in advance. The connection between brain-work and filming is a riddle to me.... I have a vague holistic idea of which kind of film I want to make. I carry it in me, and want to keep it there in its in-between-state as if it is only in this kind of unconsciousness that it is protected and can grow. That sounds like a pregnancy. I don't have children.

I understand what you say about the screen – as a special, and in a way, sacred place – but I don't think about it when I film. As a filmmaker/ editor and as a spectator I am two different things. Framing is so important in your filmmaking, in terms of how you give the objects and everything a value, coloured by your emotion. Then quite suddenly you allow yourself rare, strong movements, as if you are speaking directly to us. I like this kind of surprise in your films, not only in the movements, but also in the sudden appearance of a human being or a completely different image, as with the images at the end of each part of your *Four Little Films* (2009).

NC — It was really interesting to see your film school films, *Schweigend ins Gespräch vertieft* and *Umweg* [Detour] (1982), both because they contain elements of your later filmmaking and for themselves. *Schweigend*

feels improvisational and jazzy (including the soundtrack of course) and surrealistic in some ways, and also to be a collection of diverse fragments which nevertheless make a whole, almost as if you are challenging the film to fall apart, which it doesn't! The extended casual portrait in the second half of the film, filmed on a train in a seemingly realist way then gets changed by the bird-call on the soundtrack, which seems to be in a different space. It made me think of some films from the 1920s and 30s, in the way it brought such diverse footage together, and also perhaps of Marie Menken's *Notebook* (1962), which is much more casual, and other films of the 1950s New York avant-garde.

I liked *Umweg* a lot. Again I can see your later work in it, but in an unfamiliar way. The characteristic of 'being in the moment' during the journey takes one from the familiar outline of the Köln Dom, near the beginning of the film, to the strange, mysterious and frankly surreal colour passage near the end. It is almost as if the whole journey has taken us towards this bizarre tableau. It's catching life on the fly, with elements of a mysterious portraiture: who are the women, where are they going and why? We don't know and we don't need to know, and not-knowing is very much a part of the journey, as when one sees interesting strangers. I loved the spontaneous 'quasi-matte' effects, where a dark outline is filled with reflections, and using the train as a machine for almost-abstract tracking shots. The journey which is a portrait and which goes either nowhere or to an uncertain place is in *Schweigend* too. I also liked the choice of very different types of music on the soundtrack. The repetitions which first appear at the beginning of *Schweigend* later on become a structuring aspect of *Der Schmetterling Im Winter* [The Butterflies in Winter] (2006), which is a stunning film about great old age, where you look at a person and also a state of being that is hard to confront.

Picking up on your mention of *Rack* (filmed in Super8, with a rather dodgy camera) I really wonder whether I should exhibit tiny films like this, even by putting them on Vimeo. The same applies to some others: *Tape* (2017) was filmed in about ten minutes while waiting for a boat, and *Bed and Table* (2016) in less than an hour, though the latter also exists as a 16mm print. A one-minute or ninety-seconds film can definitely be a stand-alone thing, and different lengths of film seem to have different qualities. I am particularly fond of ninety seconds, of 100 feet of 16mm film, which is two minutes forty seconds, and of four minutes. Each of these lengths seems to allow me to do different things. Your *Four Diamonds* and *Sakura*,

Sakura seem to me to fit their durations perfectly, to do everything that the viewer might expect from a four-minute film, and much more too! At the other end of the scale, *Rushing Green with Horses* seems expansive, and to contain a whole world.

The other side of the issue of scale is that the infrastructure which supported 16mm film for prints has now largely collapsed in the UK. We have no dubbing theatre, no lab that prints 16mm colour from negative and only one neg-cutter here now. The public funders are also, on the whole, not very sympathetic to projects made and finished on film. Of course there are still some printing labs in Europe, but the whole thing ends up costing rather more. Anyhow, around 2008 I had to choose really whether to carry on making films in 16mm that were silent, or to work digitally. And for eight or nine years I had a great time making short self-funded films without sound, the last of which is the group of four little 16mm films shot in Messenia in the Peloponnese, called *Messenian Notebook* (2017). More recently I have resorted to Super8, partly for financial and partly for other reasons. Super8 often feels more provisional and casual to me. It has its problems. I'm not capable of planning enough to make perfect short films in (or straight out of) the camera, as Helga Fanderl does, so everything ends up as digital.

I like that you mention the vague holistic idea of the kind of film that one might want to make, and the way that making the film is how you find out what it wants to be and finally what it is. In my planning, I start with a shot and try to build on it. When I plan, it's usually some notes plus a shot list with sketches in a notebook. Sometimes the films take shape by shooting the shots on the list, discarding some and adding others as I go along. I can see by the way that you film people that it couldn't be like that. The intense and instantaneous way you film in portraiture contains a whole approach and philosophy.

UA — I am writing my reply on the train back to Berlin from Tübingen, where I visited the new born child, Eva, of my godson Franz. You have seen his marriage in *Rushing Green* and their first child Luisa at the end of the film. There are also images of Tübingen just before the end. It is an old German university town, where Hölderlin lived and worked in the so called 'Hölderlin-Tower'.

I made *Schweigend* after our teacher/filmmaker Helke Sander had suggested 'relationship' as the subject for our first films. I thought about relationships in a way that brought me to the idea of reflections and

mirroring. I began with a list of images related to mirroring/reflecting. The underwater sequence was inspired by a story about homosexuality that my elementary school teacher read to us in the 5th grade: a woman told about her love for women after she jumped into a swimming pool and glided along a female body. That image impressed me so strongly that I wanted to include it in my film ... in the late seventies I was in a relationship with a woman.

My filmmaker friend Ulrike and I filmed *Umweg* while we were on our first tour of 8 Kommunale Kinos (non-commercial cinemas) in eight German cities showing 'New Experimental Films by Women' including our own first films. We traveled by train with two Bolex cameras and two Sony Walkmans. We had started by writing notes about the relation between filmmaking and trains. We came back with a lot of footage, and the editing took a long time before we decided on the final film, which is almost exclusively images of the train ride.

In the 1990s I edited more and more in-camera, while filming. The final editing of a film meant reduction and finding the rhythm, and less montage. With *A Walk*, in 2009, I wanted to go back to montage. That was a shift in my filmmaking. I still edit in-camera while filming, but the montage (on my 16mm Steenbeck editing table) became very important. I edit the soundtracks on my computer with ProTools, next to the Steenbeck. I am able to synchronize image and sound by pushing the right 'buttons' at the same time. I still make 16mm prints even if it becomes terribly complicated and the projectors are not at all to be trusted.

I am just back from a festival where I was invited to show three 16mm programs. The 16mm print of *Rushing Green* is scratched so completely that I can't show it anymore. It is all very sad. But if nobody shows 16mm prints, the situation will become more and more disastrous and a lot of films will disappear from film history. That makes me very angry, because nobody seems to think about it! Two days ago Tacita Dean was invited to present two of her 16mm films at the Arsenal, a very rare occasion because she doesn't show her work in cinemas usually. She mentioned that working with celluloid is not a question of technology, it is a medium, and one of many mediums. I like her thought. It is not an alternative to digital, it is just a different medium.