



Artist Statement* Babette Mangolte

I am primarily a filmmaker who also takes photographs. Recently I have been creating site-specific installations using film screenings and stills. Writing, for me, stimulates reflection on past practices and speculation about where to go in a media world that is threatened by rapid obsolescence.

My main focus has been on light and the act of looking. The variability of light and movement has been a source of endless fascination and it has always nurtured my film work. In addition, I have tried to understand the complexity and meaning of being a spectator, and my early films attempt to propose to the film viewer a visual experience that breaks with the gaze, that displaces their identification point with the actors, which is the cornerstone of classical cinema.

Initially, my strategy was to position the spectator behind my camera's perspective composing a trilogy about the subjective camera (1975, 1977, 1979). The relentlessness of a single position in relation to the world is an imposition that forces the film spectator to be self-conscious about the act of viewing. My next three films (1979, 1982, 1991) were mainly concerned with landscape and the subtleties of light and color. These films offer multiple voices, destabilizing the traditional notion of a single, expert, authoritarian voice. Those multiple voices leave the spectator in limbo, as they seem to come from their own individual vantage point but are diverse and contradictory. Social issues related to land conservation are transformed into highly emotional debates between property rights advocates versus conservationists. My next three films (1993, 2003, 2007) focus on specific works and methods of three artists. I show the work from an outsider position, making choices that reveal what the work signifies for the artist who made it and for a spectator, who could be me. Since film technology has shifted to video, my films have focused on the study of various artists' "imaginary", where I attempt to create the possibility of contemplation and repose, while in my installation works, I attempt to invent new ways "to look at what it means to look" using architecture and screen positions.

My interest in the image started during childhood. My love of looking at paintings inspired in me the desire to become a cinematographer. In the mid-1960s this aspiration was considered foolish and sure to fail—I was told that women could not be Director of Photography in France, and it was even less likely in the US. I persisted and two historical moments helped me in my endeavor: 1968 in Paris opened the possibility to work as an assistant camera-person, so I could get training for the job, and the Women's Movement gave me the opportunity to work with other women opening doors for me both in New York and in Europe.

I have been fortunate to meet some of the greatest artists in the generation that preceded me and I have assimilated their philosophy "of blurring the boundaries between art and life" (to quote Allan Kaprow). Contact with art, in galleries and museums, is what gives me energy and sustains my drive to continue to research new topics. My parents were historians and I feel, as I grow older, that the ties I can now establish between works from many disciplines and from different cultural

contexts are specific enough to be valuable. So, rethinking history has become an important subtext of my work. In some recent works I have attempted to make historical summaries that reflect on this, such as in the silent “film” *Slide Show* made with still photographs of dancers, which I took in the 1970s, and which in 2010 I organized to demonstrate the specificity of the movement for each of those dancers. I continue to be involved, mostly with films shot on video, in building an archive of recent work of choreographers with whom I worked in the past.

New works often provoke feelings of displacement and discomfort, but in the future those works will appear obvious. To some degree, this has happened to my early films. People had problems seeing them when they were originally made. It is as if now they learned from them how to see in new ways and today my old films appear simple. In spite of the changing medium—film, videotape and now digital file—the filmic experience is all about looking and the gallery installation is all about moving while looking and listening.

More than ever, my art is about a perceptual understanding of what counts for the art lover.

*This statement together with selected essays by Babette Mangolte is part of the publication *Babette Mangolte: Writings: 1998–2015*, which will be published on the occasion of the exhibition *Babette Mangolte. I = Eye* at Kunsthalle Wien.



What does it mean to be Contemporary?*

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What does it mean for an artist to be “contemporary”? Does it mean sensing what is current and thus able to reflect one’s intuitions about the “now” in the work produced? Is doing what everyone else is doing a mark of being contemporary or the opposite? Can one become contemporary by inventing something new, which retroactively, at a future date, comes to signify this past era? And to what degree is contemporary art contingent upon the specifics of a historical moment, a given country and precise social context? Can one feel at ease with the limitations imposed by outsider status? The mirror image is a false definition of the contemporary: being “next-to” rather than being “in” is more apt. One ambiguity inherent in any allusion to the contemporary in art is in determining whether it refers to the conditions that existed when one started the work or those in which the work is seen. As one’s life changes and evolves, so too does that which is considered contemporary.

What does it mean to co-exist in two “contemporary” moments at the same time? What is it to be contemporary when there are opposite moments – the second decade of the 20th century anywhere, and the 1970s somewhere in New York City; part of an avant-garde with a small but vibrantly optimistic community, circa 1973, and a world without territory or rules or limitations, circa 2011? The French refer to “the same period” without precisely marking the size of the historical frame (a decade? a century?), but with the adjective “contemporary” the time frame is assumed to be brief, perhaps a decade, especially within the context of art when it often signifies “the now”, the way an artist reflects “the moment” or “today”. Is not being “contemporary” the ultimate illusion of the young artists of today? Their Holy Grail?

Can I still embody today the contemporaneity from earlier periods of my life? Or must I negate my own history and only embody that which is currently contemporary? The vagueness and avoidance of a specific historical reference, suddenly replaced by the “now,” reflect the sense of impermanence and rapidly increasing obsolescence occasioned by technology, specifically in media production.

Filmmakers are always immersed in the present of the action, but their purpose is not necessarily defined by it. As most filmmakers do, I think primarily about time and duration, and my concept of what is “present” is the ultimate end point of the work on the film.

Filmmakers often conceptualize time into three distinct blocks: the present time of the shoot; the given time in the narrative concept of the film; and the present moment when the film is seen. The editing and final sound mix of the film must be structured to regenerate a present each time it is projected. Films are constructed to appear current at the time of projection, so one made thirty years ago can seem as fresh and new as one made today. The final aim of filmmaking is to create a machine that actualizes the present, one that manufactures “contemporaneity.”

Photographers negotiate only two concepts of time: the decisive moment of the shooting and the eternity of the print, framed or reproduced on a page. Such an image may become emblematic of a historical moment and when, thirty years later, the original meaning needs a translation, another generation will oblige with an interpretation. As a photographer, I am able to transcend time and contemporaneity, indeed to avoid it. As a filmmaker, however, I must be immersed in it for the future and survival of my films.

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