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**Author(s)**

Tom Hastings

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**About the author(s)**

Tom Hastings is an independent writer and lecturer living in London. His doctoral thesis explores Yvonne Rainer's writing and movement practice through the 1960s.

Cover image:  Fig. 4 Exhibition view of Babette Mangolte, Spaces to SEE at Rochechouart Museum of Contemporary Art, showing *La Camera : Je, La Camera, I*, by Babette Mangolte. 1977. (© Château de Rochechouart; photograph Aurelien Mole).

# Babette Mangolte

by Tom Hastings • 11.06.2019

*Babette Mangolte: Spaces to See*, the artist's first retrospective in her native France, follows recent exhibitions of her multimedia work at VOX Contemporary Image Center, Montreal, in 2013, and at the Vienna Kunsthalle in 2016, the latter coinciding with the publication of her selected writings.<sup>1</sup> Film, photography and installation from the early 1970s to the present are displayed over three storeys of the Rochechouart Museum of Contemporary Art, a rural thirteenth-century château. Mangolte's roaming investigations across film and photography reflect the scenes of post-1960s dance and structuralist film in which she emerged. Camera shutter, car engine loop, colour fade: a roll call of such cinematic effects risks bolstering the misconception that Mangolte's legacy is secondary to those of her peers and collaborators, such as Yvonne Rainer, Lucinda Childs and Chantal Akerman. This mistaken narrative of Mangolte reads that she, the technician, gave her best work to them, the artists. The museum mounts a timely defence, not by limiting the display to Mangolte's independent work, but by demonstrating the longevity of the artistic problems that continue to occupy her. Like her aforementioned peers, she is hyperconscious of the softening of once urgent questions, observing in an Artist's Statement from 2013 that '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'.<sup>2</sup>

Mangolte has pursued similar questions over consecutive technological advances; from 35mm photography through 16mm film to video and digital, her output centres on considerations of moving bodies, the camera lens and built environments. The aggregate effect is a palpable live quality, one that is emphasised by the stillness of the château's vast rooms. In the first gallery there is a projection of Trisha Brown dancing her solo *Water Motor* in 1978 **FIG. 1**. Mangolte, who considers herself to have been the 'semi-official photographer of the Trisha Brown Dance Company' at that time, had rented Merce Cunningham's studio to film the dance, having visited Brown over a period of four weeks in order to learn the frenetic series by heart.<sup>3</sup> On the opposite wall, a cluster of black-and-white photographs of Off-Off-Broadway figures, by then inducted to New York's gallery network, locate the white-washed walls of Cunningham's studio in its context **FIG. 2**. Turn a corner, and further greyscale photographs of dancers and dance companies face off against cropped details of Manhattan stairwells, water towers and municipal buildings that Mangolte

shot between 1976 and 1977. These 'clusters', selected by Mangolte and the curator, Sébastien Faucon, do not allow a focal point to emerge, transforming the criss-crossing viewers into capricious pollinators as they work their way down the long corridor. Their terminus is *Slide Show* (2010), a looped composite of various choreographies set to durations of between three and nine seconds. The interplay between the viewer's movement and movement on screen establishes a pattern for the ensuing presentation of films.

A second slide show treats the image differently. Mangolte created *Reframing as a Way to See* (2016), which comprises details of oil paintings by artists from Breughel to Gauguin, for her solo exhibition in Vienna. There, it was exhibited on a white wall. Here, this same pictorial library is thrown by a diminutive projector onto a magnificent sixteenth-century fresco of a hunt, a carousel of reproduced and painted images of knights, trees, beasts and huntsmen **FIG. 3**. These virtual intruders beam on a plastered section of the fresco shaped like a column, or perhaps an 'I'. The form recalls a box-like prop for standing in that was constructed by Robert Morris in 1961 and reprised through various (post-) Judson performances, including one of Rainer's photographed by Mangolte in 1973 and presented in the first room, opposite *Water Motor*. *Reframing as a Way to See* thus links the depicted materials of the exhibition to their situation in Rochechouart.

If this retrospective has a keystone, it is probably *The Camera: Je, or La Camera, I* (1977), the most ambitious instalment in Mangolte's 'subjective camera' film cycle, as she refers to her first three films. Screened in a domed chamber, the film attempts to install the viewer behind the lens, offering both a theoretical study of photography and discontinuous impressions of Mangolte's practice of it. Mangolte split it into structural halves, forming two consecutive parts she termed background and foreground.<sup>4</sup> For the background, a tracking shot filmed from a moving car lazily surveys the real estate surrounding the artist's downtown apartment in Manhattan, while the foreground of *The Camera: Je* consists of a studio shoot of models whose aggressive frontality makes the viewer shrink from their assigned role as photographer **FIG. 4**. As she later reflected, 'The splice of the jump cut on the film would be masked by the superimposition of the effect of the still camera shutter release'.<sup>5</sup> These intermittent blackouts, which convey the mechanism of photography through moving image, may appear contrived now, but they speak to Mangolte's sense of urgency in the expansion of the cinematic medium in the 1970s.

Three installations, spaced at intervals throughout the retrospective, read as continued meditations on the 'subjective camera'. *Toucher avec Collage II* **FIG. 5** includes a trestle table covered with prints and contact sheets of Rainer's *Story of a Woman Who...* (1973), among other performances, which the viewer

is invited to rearrange by hand **FIG. 6**. A lingering desire is made palpable in both *Edward Krasin's Studio* (2011) and *Patricia Patterson Paintings* (1988–89), two films whose slow panning over the respective artists' workspace and paintings is offset by humorous film portraits of Yvonne Rainer (1972) and Richard Serra (1977).

The installation *Présence* (2008) groups a series of photographs with recent and early films. Time-lapsed footage of a garden doorway is juxtaposed with *(Now) or Maintenant Entre Parenthèses* (1976), a film in which a collapsing pyramid of cigarette packets elicits weeping and laughter from a seated woman; postcards fly across a dining-room table; and hands caress one another. *Présence* outlines a presentation format that comes to fruition with *Eloge du Vert* (2012–13), a large-scale installation that coheres around a specific photographic subject, the colour green **FIG. 7**. Clusters of landscapes photographed during the artist's global travels encircle a triangular partition onto which handheld video footage of town and country is projected. The light from these is all that illuminates the surrounding clusters. Waves of disappearing and re-enchanted green tones lead you into the triangle's bright centre, where stills from *The Camera: Je*, of a figure walking in circles (after Eadweard Muybridge), are pinned to the partition walls – a silent cinema.



Fig. 6 Exhibition view of *Babette Mangolte, Spaces to SEE* at Rochechouart Museum of Contemporary Art, showing *Touching*, by Babette Mangolte. 2008/2019. (© Chateau de Rochechouart; photograph Aurelien Mole).



Fig. 7 Exhibition view of *Babette Mangolte, Spaces to SEE* at Rochechouart Museum of Contemporary Art, showing *Eloge du Vert*, by Babette Mangolte. 2012–13/2019. (© Chateau de Rochechouart; photograph Aurelien Mole).

**Exhibition details**     **Babette Mangolte: Spaces to See**  
Rochechouart Museum of Contemporary  
Art, Rochechouart, France  
1st March–16th September 2019

## Footnotes

- 1 B. Mangolte: *Selected Writings: 1998–2015*, Berlin 2018.
- 2 ‘Artist’s Statement’, *ibid.*, p.273.
- 3 ‘Of the making of “Water Motor: A Dance” by Trisha Brown’ [2003], *ibid.*, p.73.
- 4 ‘I would show the foreground and background as separate entities in the film structure. The first part would be shooting faces and the second part shooting the space of the city, as it was the location where my photographic work took place’. See, ‘The Making of “The Camera: Je/La Camera, I”’ [2014], *ibid.*, p.300.
- 5 ‘The Making of “The Camera: Je/La Camera, I”’ [2014], *ibid.*, p.302.

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