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Anything Goes

Portraits at a slant

Phil Coldiron



N'importe quoi (for Brunhild)

Director **LUKE FOWLER**

Year **2023**

Country **UK**



Marble Film Part I & Marble Film Part II

Director LUCY HARRIS

Year 2024

Country UK



Afterthoughts of a Walk on the Naze
Director LOUIS HENDERSON
Year 2023
Country UK



Disappearances

Director JAMES EDMONDS

Year 2023

Country UK, GERMANY

As a mode, the norms of portraiture were settled by the first century A.D. A relatively straight line can be drawn from, say, the *Portrait of A Young Woman in Red* (c. 90-120 A.D.) to the work of any of the last century's great portraitists. While those two thousand years have seen the invention of an unsurprisingly wide array of formal and symbolic armatures, the central fact of the human face and all its mysteries remains consistent. On this level, a continuity emerges across sensibilities as disparate as Vigée Le Brun and Arbus, Velazquez and Hendricks, Rembrandt and Goldin.

Cinema didn't quite begin with the face, but its role quickly became central. From as early as the research of Vertov and Epstein, the face in motion was understood as uniquely compelling, capable of betraying a whole new range of expressive possibilities too subtle for stillness to capture. It's odd, then, how rarely artists have produced filmed portraits free of any narrative framework. There are, of course, by now thousands of biographical documentaries—many based around the oft-derided 'talking head'—but with the towering exception of Warhol's *Screen Tests*, cinema's most sophisticated and accomplished pure portraits have tended to work obliquely, drawing together fragments around the empty centre

of their subject, whose face appears rarely, if at all.

Luke Fowler's two decades of work comprise, I think, the most significant body of cinematic portraiture produced to date. He has fashioned a canon of eccentric, obscure, or under-recognized artists and thinkers out of the sediment of their lives, the documents of their archives, the places they passed through. Biography is absent; anecdote, even, is minimal. If classical portraiture attempts to pluck its subject from the world and refashion them as a symbol of it (Goldin's work depends on showing just how unwilling the world is to let go of its subjects), Fowler works by the inverse, beginning with the world at large and searching out the tiniest traces that might speak to a single, specific path through it.

N'importe quoi. Anything goes, it's all game, as the world forever is before the camera. And so finally we arrive at his remarkable new film, *N'Importe quoi (for Brunhild)*, a portrait of Brunhild Meyer-Ferrari, who, alongside her husband Luc, did as much as anyone to realize the post-Cagean whatever of musical composition, to test the thin line between the form of the world and the forms of art. Fowler begins in Meyer-Ferrari's charmingly cluttered studio, catching glimpses of her amidst endless stacks of tapes and analog devices for the recording and manipulation of sound. "Je pense sans parole," she says—"I think without words"—and Fowler cuts to a pair of glasses upon a tabletop in burnished, golden light: some think with microphones, others with lenses. Meyer-Ferrari departs the studio with her microphone to collect the sounds of Parisian parks and train stations. At the moment of this transition from studio to city, she recounts her earliest meetings with the man who would become her husband and collaborator, Luc Ferrari, a founding member of Groupe de Recherche (GRM) with Pierre Schaeffer. Of Schaeffer, she says, "He engaged me for work that was really interesting to me: it was research on [the] relationship between sound and image."

The final image we see of the studio in this opening passage is a tape box labeled *presque rien*—next to nothing—then, after a rhythmic cut to black, Meyer-Ferrari alone in the dusty bowl of a park as urban ambience fills the soundtrack. Fowler holds on this medium shot for 10 seconds or so, before moving into one of his typical series of quick reframings, culminating in another cut to black which leads on to an instance of his other recurring gesture: rotating the Bolex's turret mid-shot, drawing a curved image down as the lens pops into place. The sound, previously continuous, changes abruptly at this last cut; where we heard chatter and sporting thwacks that might have seemed appropriate to a park on a sunny day, there is only sparse birdsong and the rustle of leaves. This layering of potential realities is, I'll suggest, the ground of Fowler's practice.

Lucy Harris' *Marble Film*, Louis Henderson's *Afterthoughts of a Walk on the Naze*, and James Edmonds' *Disappearances* are more oblique portraits than *N'Importe quoi*, but each shares this sense of layered reality. For Harris, who also depicts a group at work on their craft—in this case, the production of carved marble—it's a matter of order and priority. Across the first part of *Marble Film* (it consists of two segments; only the first was available for preview), we see images that fall into three broad categories: the hands of figures performing somewhat inscrutable gestures; the drawing of what seem to be schematic images; and the actual work of carving marble (this latter clarifies at least some of the pantomimed gestures). But what initially appears to be a relatively straightforward document of artisanal labour is thrown into relief by the dawning realization of what is being carved, an object which reframes the film as a collective multimedia performance.

Slippages between mediums are likewise central to Henderson's *Afterthoughts*, a kind of

landscape detective film which attempts to make sense of a letter written to the filmmaker in his infancy by his great-uncle, the artist Nigel Henderson. A sense of doubt creeps in, as this missive warps time and causality in odd and unaccountable ways. Whether or not this letter is historically ‘true’ matters less than the compelling sense Henderson conjures of being haunted not by a man he never knew, but by his art, and by the landscape and history that shaped it. Edmonds, meanwhile, takes a markedly different approach to the British countryside. Like Fowler, he has learned deeply from his time working on the restoration of Gregory Markopoulos’ massive *Eniaios*—one of the great works of fragmented portraiture—and the lessons on in-camera editing he has taken from that material are apparent in this deceptively humble diary of his return home after several years of pandemic-induced absence. Filming in quick bursts, often less than a second, Edmonds’ approach to layering is emotional, drawing out the contingency at the heart of the familiar.

This question of chance returns us to Fowler. Now back in the studio, Meyer-Ferrari sits for a medium close-up—only her downturned face and the corsage of white flowers affixed to her black sweater are illuminated in an otherwise shadowed room, the most conventional portrait Fowler has ever shot—and reflects in voiceover on her career, “When I begin to record, I tried to make experiences with the microphone”—she turns to face the camera, smiles—“but I abandoned it very quickly, and I let the microphone do its work and I was more quiet with the instrument.” Fowler, with evident delight and curiosity and recognition, responds, “But then you changed to just putting it on the stand and listening?”

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