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Chantal Akerman in London

“Curating is not so much the product of curators as it is the fruit of the labor of a network of agents. The outcome is a stirring of smooth surfaces, a specific, multi-layered way of agitating environments both inside and outside the white cube. The curatorial involves not just representing but presenting and testing; it performs something here and now instead of merely mapping something from there and then.”¹

Chantal Akerman was one of the first independent filmmakers to engage with the gallery space in the mid 1990s, expanding her audience and addressing issues of installation and visual art. Akerman’s work pursued a critical investigation into geography and identity, space and time, borders, itineraries, identity, and states of mind.

Since 2013 in London, the work of Chantal Akerman has been at the center of a series of interconnected projects involving retrospective screenings, in-person presentations, symposiums, a major exhibition, an international conference, and a publication. This Akerman project, which grew spontaneously, was initiated by *A Nos Amours*² (curators and filmmakers Adam Roberts and Joanna Hogg), who presented an exhaustive retrospective of Akerman’s film and video works. More than 40 films in 25 screenings were programmed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, over a two-year period, from September 26, 2013 to October 22, 2015. Many of the films were translated and subtitled live for English-speaking audiences for the first time and shown in the nearest original format. Akerman attended a number of screenings in person to introduce and take questions, and the majority were sold out.

Following the screening series and developed to coincide with the premiere of her latest film, Ambika P3 presented a major exhibition *Chantal Akerman: NOW* in its central London underground space from October 30 to December 6, 2015. The exhibition was jointly curated by Ambika P3 (Michael Mazière) and *A Nos Amours* (Joanna Hogg and Adam Roberts) and presented in association with Marian

¹ Lind, M. (2009) “On the Curatorial,” *Artforum*, October 2009, pp. 15-16.

² *A Nos Amours* founded by Joanna Hogg and Adam Roberts is a curatorial artist-led initiative, launched in 2011 to promote and explore film and the condition of film and spectatorship, at a critical time of change for audiences and the screening and experience of moving images. Hogg is a renowned film director and screenwriter who has won numerous awards for her feature films, including *Archipelago* (2011) and *Exhibition* (2014). Roberts has made a distinctive body of film work, in particular with such dancers and choreographers as Sylvie Guillem and Jonathan Burrows and been supported by BFI, National Lottery and UK Film Council. www.anosamours.co.uk

Goodman Gallery³. Subsequently, the Centre for Research and Education in Arts and Media (CREAM)⁴ at the University of Westminster organized a two-day conference to celebrate and critically explore the work and legacy of Chantal Akerman. The conference (November 4-6, 2016) included keynotes by Janet Bergstrom (UCLA), Sandy Flitterman-Lewis (Rutgers University), Dominique Paini (Paris), Griselda Pollock (University of Leeds), Adam Roberts (A Nos Amours) and Corinne Rondeau (University of Nimes). These, a selection of papers from the conference and new material will be published in the Journal MIRAJ⁵ due out in 2019.

These connected manifestations of Akerman's work were not planned but rather developed through a combination of serendipity, commitment and collaboration on the part of all the participants. The energy that drove them was both the desire to find new audiences for an important artist who had been in the shadows and to give renewed critical attention to alternative and radical film and video practices seemingly overlooked by changes in the economy, politics and dissemination of the moving image.

The exhibition was born of a meeting, brokered and attended by the director of our research group, Rosie Thomas, between the duo of A Nos Amours who had been curating the complete retrospective of her single-screen work and me, curator of the Ambika P3 space. The site of the exhibition, Ambika P3, has a special significance – it is an unusually large-scale post-industrial venue, neither a public-funded space nor a commercial gallery, but a public-facing site for experimentation and research under the auspices of the University of Westminster. Unlike venues such as museums,

³ *Chantal Akerman: NOW* was funded by Arts Council England, Marian Goodman Gallery and the University of Westminster. Production credits include Mohammed Ali, Claire Atherton, Carole Billy, Heather Blair, Andrew Leslie Heyward, Christian Marti, Christian Newton, Jonathan Samuels, Pascal Willekens and the Vidi-Square team.

⁴ *The Centre for Research and Education in Arts and Media* (CREAM) is comprised of 35 researchers and over 65 PhD students. The 2014 Research Excellence Framework judged us the UK's leading research center in art and design with 95% of our research either judged world-leading or internationally excellent.

⁵ *The Moving Image Review & Art Journal (MIRAJ)* is an international peer-reviewed scholarly publication devoted to artists' film and video and its contexts. It offers a forum for debates surrounding all forms of artists' moving-image and media artworks: films, video installations, expanded cinema, video performance, experimental documentaries, animations, and other screen-based works made by artists. *MIRAJ* aims to consolidate artists' moving image as a distinct area of study that bridges a number of disciplines, not limited to, but including art, film, and media. The Akerman issue will be the first of our new co-editorship of the Journal at CREAM (Co-Editors Lucy Reynolds & myself).

galleries and cinemas, this multidisciplinary, industrial site enables the exhibitions to operate at arm's length from both the physical boundaries of the white cube and the black box and their ideological constraints.⁶

I knew Chantal Akerman's early, iconic works of the 1970s, particularly her experimental films *News from Home* (1977), *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* (1974) and *Hotel Monterey* (1972), and had only recently connected with her later work. Her installation work was largely unknown in the United Kingdom and rarely shown. We hoped that Akerman would be interested in exhibiting with us, because of the eclectic nature of our program its reputation for risky innovation, and also because the collaboration had the potential to present a substantial retrospective of her body of installation work for the first time in the UK.

Following and complementary to the major two-year retrospective of her single - screen works at the ICA, the purpose of this exhibition was to take the audience through an itinerary of her installation work in a bespoke design including, as its centrepiece, the UK premiere of a new commission by Marian Goodman Gallery, titled *NOW*, a multiprojection work shot in the Middle East. The exhibition would include seven of her nine large-scale installation works and the opening would coincide with the UK premiere of her new film, *No Home Movie* (2015), on October 30, 2015, at Regent Street Cinema, London.

I first met Chantal Akerman in May 2014, at our first production meeting in Ambika P3. For most of the meeting she talked with great frankness about her personal life and the impact of the recent death of her mother. She mixed the political and the personal with her distinct disinterest in boundaries. Developing the exhibition was challenging, first because many works had complex and precise requirements in terms of space, projection and sound; second, Akerman was living in Paris and not always accessible; and third, the configuration of the new commission *NOW*, which was in development for the Venice Biennale and was to be the centerpiece of the exhibition, kept changing.

At our meetings, Carole Billy, Exhibition Manager at Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris,

⁶ Ambika P3 was developed in 2007. Artists who have addressed the site include Anthony McCall (2011); David Hall (2012); Ilya & Emilia Kabakov (2013), Victor Burgin (2013), and Elizabeth Ogilvie (2014), with solo exhibitions, and Jasmina Cibic, Federico Díaz, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Rémy Markowitsch, Lindsay Seers and Tunga with the group exhibition 'Casebooks' (2017).

always accompanied Akerman and played an invaluable role as a go-between during the eighteen months of development. Many variations on the layout, design and selected works took place over that period – Akerman wanted the audience to travel through her works in the space, as she had travelled through the world making them. She had a distinct idea of how each work should be positioned in relation to the next, and a specific itinerary in mind for the audience. So, the logic of space, sound, content, and scale were not the only guiding factors in the layout – they all came into play within the framework of her imaginary itinerary. She was forceful but open to suggestions, new ideas, and strategies for the exhibition.

The curatorial process was collaborative and the curators working on the project had to share knowledge and communicate regularly in order to produce a selection of work and a design of the space, which would facilitate the engagement of the audience in what are dense and demanding artworks. The decision to present seven substantial works meant that we had to build a very large, made-to-measure construction to museum standard.

NOW opened at the Venice Biennale in May 2015.⁷ After the Venice Biennale we pursued the development of the Ambika P3 exhibition project with the support of her gallery and designer. Akerman came back to the gallery on July 15, 2015, and we spent the day finalizing all aspects of the exhibition. I noticed that her hair was cropped short and uneven. She said she had done it herself. We walked around the Ambika P3 space together and then set up a chair for her – she sat in the middle of the vast bunker.

Akerman's work is very subjective, while at the same time consistently in flux, formally and conceptually. The project was developed in a manner that suited Akerman's way of working, that is, not fully conceptualized from the outset but open to a form of process-led production. That form of flexibility can only be possible if the curation is approached as it was, as a development and dialogue with the artist. It took time – two years from start to finish.

There were seven works at Ambika P3⁸: the centerpiece was *NOW* (2015),

⁷ The installation commission *NOW* was exhibited at the Biennale as part of the Arsenale exhibition "All the World's Futures" curated by Okwui Enwezor, which opened on May 6, 2015

⁸ Works in the Exhibition: *In the Mirror* (1971/2007) Single channel video projection with sound (16mm transferred to video); *A Voice in the Desert* (2002) Single channel video projection with

consisting of a multi-channel video installation with surround sound. The new work *NOW* was different than we had anticipated. It was a larger, more ambitious piece, devoid of people and the many different visual forms and styles Akerman had used in her earlier works. It is a breakthrough work, a departure. That is why we named the whole exhibition by its title. For this work, Akerman collected images from desert regions, specifically violently contested regions in the Middle East, her aim to present the current condition of violence and conflict as lived experience. The stillness of much of her work, often concerned with interiority, domestic spaces, and forgotten and erased histories, is here replaced by the clamor of war and amplified noise. Upon entry, one was assaulted by a densely layered soundtrack of birds, screams, helicopters, gunshots, explosions, and wind, while on five hanging perspex screens were projected a suite of films shot of the empty desert from a moving car. It was mesmerizing and hard for the audience. She had told me she wanted to transmit “the claustrophobia of war.” At the back stood two fake Chinese fish tanks surrounded by plastic flowers and colored neon. Maybe they proposed an antithesis to the violence of the installation; but not for long. The densely layered and sometimes overbearing soundtrack operated as the driving narrative, and the images functioned as backdrops – she had inverted the conventional hierarchy of sound and image. Other works in the exhibition spanned from 1995 to 2013 and investigated a variety of emotive themes such as the US/Mexico border (*A Voice in the Desert*, 2002), the atom bomb and Hiroshima (*Maniac Summer*, 2009), women reclaiming images of themselves (*In The Mirror*), the dichotomous relationship between presence and absence (*Maniac Shadows*, 2013), the Eastern bloc countries before the fall of Communism (*D’Est*, 1995) and the dark (*Tombée de nuit sur Shanghai*, 2007).

The final design dedicated the main space to the new work *NOW* and would be accessed last by the audience, as Akerman wished. In the lower side of the space we fit five works and on the mezzanine was her earliest work, *In the Mirror* (1971/2007), a portrait of a woman looking at herself naked in the mirror and commenting critically on

sound; *Maniac Summer* (2009) Four channel video projection, with sound. *Maniac Shadows* (2013), Four channel video projection, two soundtracks, 96 images; *Tombée de nuit sur Shanghai* (2007) (*Nightfall in Shanghai*) Single channel video projection with sound and two Chinese lanterns; *D’est: au bord de la fiction* (1995) (*From the East: Bordering on Fiction*) Twenty-four monitors and one single monitor, with sound, and *NOW* (2015) Seven channel video projection with surround sound.

her body. This design had the advantage of allowing the audience to have a beginning and end point and, in the lower space, a more open territory they could navigate between. This open territory provided the appropriate nomadic itinerary among a borderless grouping of works that could be navigated in a non-hierarchical way. The form of the exhibition was then suited to its function -- and offered the audience a way into Akerman's life experience and art strategies.

Chantal Akerman disappeared on October 5, 2015, just short of a month before the opening of the exhibition. The immeasurable tragedy of Akerman's suicide is not a matter for this essay. Her absence during this crucial pre-production and build leading to the opening of the exhibition meant that a number of contingencies had to be put in place at short notice. Carole Billy from Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris, and Claire Atherton (Akerman's film editor and collaborator) came on site to advise on construction details, and Pascal Willekens from VIDI SQUARE who had previously installed some of the works also came specially to help on the build. This was a difficult moment that tested all concerned, and it was some compensation to see public, press and colleagues engage so strongly with Akerman's complex work. The exhibition made visible Akerman's contemporary installation work to a broad UK audience, most of whom knew her for her cinema work, and also provided some comfort for the global community who knew her work as well as the artists' close friends and family.

The project seen in its totality and indeed its process, with its multiplicity of outputs and the collaborative dedication of the partners, has become a fitting testament to the strength of the work of the artist. For the exhibition, the formal and aesthetic presentation were the result of a flexible and experimental strategy. It was also Akerman's response to the qualities offered by the Ambika P3 space, the openness and flexibility of the structure and her ability to exploit its industrial site.

In her absence, the exhibition was delivered exactly as we had planned it with her, so that the audiences, the press and the art world would experience Chantal Akerman's rarely seen installation work as she had wished. It was extremely well attended and extensively covered by the international press. Chantal Akerman was not a conceptualist, she developed her work through process, always questioning her own decisions and aiming to meet the extraordinarily high standards she set herself for all her works.

Chantal's voice, her face, her body, her life, her past, her ancestral past – all these are, for those of us who have travelled through her work, now imprinted on us

*forever.*⁹

Michael Mazière

Bio:

Dr Michael Mazière is an artist and curator, currently Reader in Film and Video at the University of Westminster. His practice encompasses the production of artworks, the curation of exhibitions, lecturing, and writing about artists' film and video. He is the co-founder and curator of Ambika P3, an experimental research space for international contemporary art, an active member of the Centre for Research and Education in Arts and Media (CREAM) and co-editor of the Moving Image Review & Art Journal (MIRAJ), an international peer-reviewed scholarly publication devoted to artists' film and video and its contexts.

⁹ 'Chantal Akerman: extraordinary artist of the everyday who we will miss for ever'. Joanna Hogg and Adam Roberts, the Guardian, Thursday 8 October 2015