

ARTFORUM

Persistence of Vision

By Malcolm Turvey (November 2008)



How does one convert a film initially designed for theatrical screening into a gallery installation? Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman has taken up this question by reconfiguring two of her documentaries, *D'est* (From the East, 1993) and *De l'autre côté* (From the Other Side, 2002), into installations (1995 and 2002, respectively) that are on view in her current traveling survey, "Chantal Akerman: Moving Through Time and Space." Also exhibited are an installation commissioned for the show, *Femmes d'Anvers en novembre* (Women of Antwerp in November), 2007, and two other nonfiction videos, *Sud* (South), 1999, and *Là-bas* (Down There), 2006. Together, the three installations demonstrate that Akerman's unique spatiotemporal sensibility, honed in her remarkable films of the 1970s, translates well into the space of the gallery, which she has used to great effect to amplify certain core features of her practice.

Like other avant-garde filmmakers of the period, Akerman foregrounds space and time to an unusual degree in her films of the '70s. In conventional cinema, time and space are generally subordinate to the subject of the film and are only made overt when they serve the communication of that subject—the narrative in a fiction film, the argument in a documentary.

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But starting with *La Chambre 1* (*The Room 1*) and *Hôtel Monterey* (both 1972), space and time become the subject of Akerman's films, or are given equal prominence, due to a range of formal and stylistic techniques. The films eschew close-ups and shot/reverse-shot sequences in favor of long-shot framing and deep focus, in which most if not all of a person's body is visible along with much of the surrounding environment; this forces the viewer to scan the space of the shot for relevant details of behavior and setting. Symmetrical frame composition, with the camera placed at the same height perpendicular to the setting, creates a noticeable rectilinear patterning from shot to shot as well as a high degree of uniformity, sensitizing one to subtle changes over time. The long take coupled with dead time produces a feeling of anticipation: The viewer waits for something significant to happen, and becomes acutely conscious of that waiting.

Whole films are organized around spatial and temporal structures. Akerman's repeated pan of her apartment in *La Chambre 1* refuses to privilege the filmmaker lying in bed as it takes in the surrounding space and its contents. *Hôtel Monterey* consists of shots of a low-rent hotel, beginning in the lobby at night, then ascending through the hotel's elevator, floors, and rooms, and ending on the roof the next morning. *Toute une nuit* (*All Night Long*, 1982) takes place over a single night in Brussels, as various people leave and return to their homes, wait for and miss one another, quarrel, part, meet, and embrace, in a string of fragmented and unconnected stories.

As scholar Ivone Margulies has argued, "Akerman's boldness as a filmmaker lies in her charging the mundane with significance." In Akerman's films, as in Alfred Hitchcock's, drama is to be found everywhere beneath—indeed on—the surface of quotidian reality if one only looks closely enough, and her use of space and time forces the viewer to pay careful attention to the commonplace. She is thus heir to the tradition of dedramatization pursued by directors such as Roberto Rossellini and Michelangelo Antonioni. Dedramatization does not mean the absence of drama. Instead, conventionally dramatic occurrences coexist with what theorist André Bazin famously referred to as the "microaction" beloved by the Neorealists (such as the maid waking up and beginning her housework in Vittorio de Sica's *Umberto D.* [1952]). The mundane is treated with just as much significance as the dramatic, thereby "rul[ing] out the slightest hierarchy," as Bazin put it, between the two. Akerman pushes dedramatization even further than her cinematic forebears, fully reversing traditional narrative hierarchy and focusing on microactions. In what many regard as Akerman's masterpiece, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), the viewer must observe three hours of Jeanne's daily ritual of housework and receiving clients before witnessing the more standard dramatic acts of sex and murder. In Akerman's completely nonnarrative films, one is encouraged to attend to abstract visual patterns and rhythms in shots of ordinary people and places. Patient contemplation of the prosaic in *Jeanne Dielman* and other films uncovers the psychology of a character—but only to some extent, for, as in much modernist cinema, Akerman's characters remain largely opaque. Legions of critics have debated Jeanne Dielman's state of mind because the film offers so few clues as to her true thoughts and feelings, and the few that surface are ambiguous.

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Nor is it clear why the character Julie remains with the truck driver she encounters when hitchhiking in *Je tu il elle* (*I You He She*, 1974), or what the precise nature of her relationship is to the woman she has sex with. In *Hôtel Monterey*, a silent film, all we learn about the hotel guests is what we can infer from their brief appearances as they pass through the lobby, corridors, and elevator. When we do see them inside their rooms, they are either turned away from the camera or facing it impassively. With *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (*Meetings with Anna*, 1978), however, Akerman began to focus increasingly on the larger historical forces revealed by assiduous examination of the everyday: “[B]ehind . . . the insignificant events that [Anna] will be told about,” Akerman has said of this film, “we shall see the shape of great collective events, the history of countries, the history of Europe and its last fifty years.” The sum effect of this style of filmmaking can be described as objectivity without omniscience. These films impart an almost tactile sense of what it is like to observe, from a respectful distance, the people and places they record and the concrete sights and sounds one would experience in doing so. Yet most other information is withheld, underscoring the limits of what one can discover through perception alone.



In the '80s, Akerman adopted a more conventional visual style in her fiction films, employing widely used norms such as shot/reverse shot and analytic editing (although her predilection for long takes persisted). Critics who admired her earlier work were disappointed. Yet her fiction films since then—*Golden Eighties* (1986), *Nuit et jour* (*Night and Day*, 1991), *Un Divan à New York* (*A Couch in New York*, 1996), and *Demain on déménage* (*Tomorrow We Move*, 2004)—have continued the tendency initiated by *Toute une nuit* to play, often ingeniously, with the popular genres of romance and comedy, particularly the bodily and verbal rhythms of screwball and slapstick.

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(Only *La Captive* [*The Captive*, 2000] can truly be described as conventional, as it is a straightforward art film.) Nor has the visual style of her '70s films disappeared, as it was amply in evidence in the documentaries on view in "Moving Through Time and Space." All four documentaries in the exhibition investigate a particular geographic location and its inhabitants: Eastern Europe in *D'est*, the southern United States in *Sud*, the border between Mexico and the United States in *De l'autre côté*, and Tel Aviv in *Là-bas*. Akerman films the residents of each locale, who are usually anonymous, engaged in the ordinary activities of waiting, walking, driving, talking, working, playing, and eating. Some stare at the camera; others avert their eyes. Interspersed throughout are numerous shots of empty streets and surrounding landscapes. As in *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, it is the broader historical condition behind or on the surface of everyday reality that Akerman seems keen to uncover—the changes occurring in postcommunist Eastern Europe in *D'est*, racism in *Sud*, migration in *De l'autre côté* and *Là-bas*. In order to encourage the viewer to discern this history through patient observation, Akerman leans heavily on the long take and perpendicular deep-focus long shot, sometimes still, at other times taken from a vehicle moving slowly through the streets of the location in question. She also regularly employs a full-frontal schema (first seen in a shot of a guest in his room in *Hôtel Monterey*), in which the subject sits or stands in an intimate setting facing the camera. Sometimes these subjects speak; often they do not. These films tend to forgo the facts and figures that are the currency of traditional travelogues, leaving the viewer with many unanswered questions about what is being shown. Instead, like Akerman's films of the '70s, they convey a forceful physical impression of what it is to be an outsider observing these locales.

In the installation versions of *D'est* and *De l'autre côté*, Akerman's primary strategy is to use the spatial and temporal resources of the gallery to overcome the sequential presentation of shots that is the norm in film viewing. In both installations, dozens of monitors were arranged in overlapping, receding rows, all facing in the same direction and simultaneously presenting different film segments. This setup allowed Akerman to expand on the democratizing potential of the long take and deep focus. Bazin, writing about these techniques in the films of Orson Welles, William Wyler, and Jean Renoir, argued that they require the viewer "to exercise at least a minimum of personal choice" about what to look at in the image.

While analytic editing—the breakdown of a scene into medium and close-up shots—guides the viewer's attention, showing different details of the scene at the moment of the filmmaker's choosing, a long take shot in depth grants the viewer a greater degree of control over where to look within the image and when. Akerman gives viewers even more autonomy in these two installations, allowing them to choose which parts of the films to watch by allowing them to move among the monitors at will. Yet the arrangement of the monitors ensures that the viewer is aware of and always potentially distracted by the peripheral vision of other screens. A range of sights and sounds thus competes for one's attention; none are privileged.

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The “ontological equality,” the “succession of concrete instants of life, no one of which can be said to be more important than another” that Bazin admired about Neorealist dedramatization is here literally instantiated.

This strategy also enables Akerman to further extend the spectatorial mode of patient contemplation. As in her '70s films, the placement of the camera at the same height perpendicular to the setting, coupled with numerous camera movements at a slow pace, creates a high degree of stylistic consistency, sensitizing the viewer to subtle motifs, symmetries, and repetitions common to all the monitors. These patterns contribute to an overall impression of the films' subjects, and they are amplified by screening the same segment on different monitors in different parts of the gallery, as well as repeating segments on adjacent monitors, which are grouped in rows of three or four. Both installations include a second room in which a single sequence plays in tandem with a voice-over of Akerman reading a text. In the D'est installation, the text mainly concerns Akerman's personal motivations for traveling to Eastern Europe (she is the daughter of Polish Jews). In the De l'autre côté installation, she tells the story of someone searching for an immigrant relative who has gone missing. Both narrations are accompanied by shots of streets or highways at night, and they remind us of the dramatic historical events shaping the prosaic images we see.



Femmes d'Anvers en novembre, the installation commissioned for the show, makes use of the same setup. Twenty fictional sequences, each depicting one or more women smoking at night, are exhibited in a twenty-minute loop on a wall in a darkened room, five at a time in a five-part, split-screen projection. The sequences are of different lengths and filmed from a variety of angles and distances. Some are repeated on different screens, and they switch unpredictably between color and black-and-white. Meanwhile, on the opposite wall, a single sequence of a woman smoking is shown.

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Although no expository information about these women is provided, each is clearly in a different mental state, ranging from boredom and loneliness to fear and distress, and, as with the fragments of stories in *Toute une nuit*, one is left wondering about their particular circumstances and fates. Once again, the viewer cannot watch any single sequence in isolation from the others, and we become attuned to subtle similarities and differences among the gestures, postures, and expressions of the women. The prosaic act of smoking is thereby transformed into a multifaceted event rich in meanings and associations. This installation powerfully crystallized the improbable combination at the heart of Akerman's work since the '70s. On the one hand, it displayed the humanistic and epistemological faith in the observation of the commonplace championed by Bazin and other realists: We learn much about these women through an extended viewing of their engagement in ordinary activity. Yet this realist conviction is combined with the deep skepticism of vision endemic to modernism, as there is much we still cannot discover by watching them. Through the intelligent use of multiple moving images exhibited simultaneously and in close proximity, Akerman has found a way of successfully extending this conceit into the gallery.

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