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File Note #32 Chantal Akerman

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Dominique Païni

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Well in advance, and without ever ceasing to be a filmmaker, in the 1990s Chantal Akerman took the adventurous step of exhibiting her images in a gallery of contemporary art (her magnificent layout of *D'Est* [From the East] at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis and the Jeu de Paume, Paris, in 1995–96). She also wrote (admirably well) and, with her “bare voice,” spoke her own texts (*Une famille à Bruxelles* [A Family in Brussels], 1998) and made videos about artists and choreographers.

How does one define the inventions of this filmmaker and artist whose career offers such diversity? What model can we find for each new film when at first viewing it seems so far from the previous one? Well, strangely enough, classic Hollywood cinema provides an appropriate example here: in the thirties, directors like Lubitsch and Borzage tried their hand at everything from comedies and thrillers to exotic adventures, historical drama and burlesque.

Doing it differently from the last film—is ultimately how one could describe the logic of this director who, paradoxically, is compelled by similitude, repetition, resemblance, homo-sentimentality and the fascination of sameness.

D'Est (From the East), 1993 and *Sud* (South of Europe), 1998/9 are as similar as they are opposed. *Un Divan à New York* (A Couch in New York), 1996 and *La Captive* (The Captive), 1999 constitute two cardinal points in the conception of amorous union: a couple that is osmotic in spite of geographical distance, and a couple that grows apart in the closeness of captivity. Thus everything is opposed and yet fits together in this body of work characterised by its shifting styles. From *Jeanne Dielman*, 1975 to *Le Déménagement* (The Move), 1992 from *La Chambre* (The Room), 1972 to *Les rendez-vous d'Anna* (The Meetings of Anna), 1978 Akerman puts

D'Est (From the East) 1993
Documentary, 35mm, 107 min, colour
Production: Paradise Films,
Brussels / Lieurac production, Paris



De l'autre côté (From the other side) 2002
Documentary, video/16mm, 102 min, colour
Production, Amip, Chemah IS, Arte

forward a dialectical proposition whose contradictions find dramaturgical resolution in the interiors of apartments. She has invented a modern “kammerspiel” that is as droll or as tragic as in Lubitsch or Strindberg, those two virtuosi of “chamber drama.”

It is this dominant presence of interiors from one film to the next that enables both the exceptional variations that are journeys into the modern genres of cinema—films about art (about Jean-Luc Vilmouth, Pina Bausch), confessions or the personal journal (*News from Home*, 1976), expanded cinema (the installation of *D’Est*)—and her simultaneously admiring and critical revisiting of classic genres such as sophisticated comedy (*Un Divan à New York* [A Couch in New York], 1996), musical comedy (*Golden Eighties*, 1985 and *Toute une Nuit* [All Night Long], 1982) and slapstick (*J’ai faim, j’ai froid* [I’m cold and I’m hungry], 1984).

Always rigorous, she is the exemplary artist of the coming cinema, refusing any kind of “brand labelling.”

Her new proposition, *Femmes d’Anvers en novembre* (Women from Antwerp in November), 2007, surprises yet again, comprising as it does two projections, a face in close-up (*The Square Black and White Portrait*) and a panoramic cityscape (*The Landscape*). Face and landscape, close-up and distance shot—the basic, binary terms of film-making are reconstituted in the gallery.

It is as if, by sparing her the duty of compliance with the demands of a narrative, the space of the gallery (or museum) has once again provided Akerman with the opportunity to get back to the *essentials* of cinema.

However, the beauty and emotion that emanate from this new installation is due to more than this formal concern, for these “Women from Antwerp” are also messengers of memory, starting with the memory of Akerman’s own work and influences.

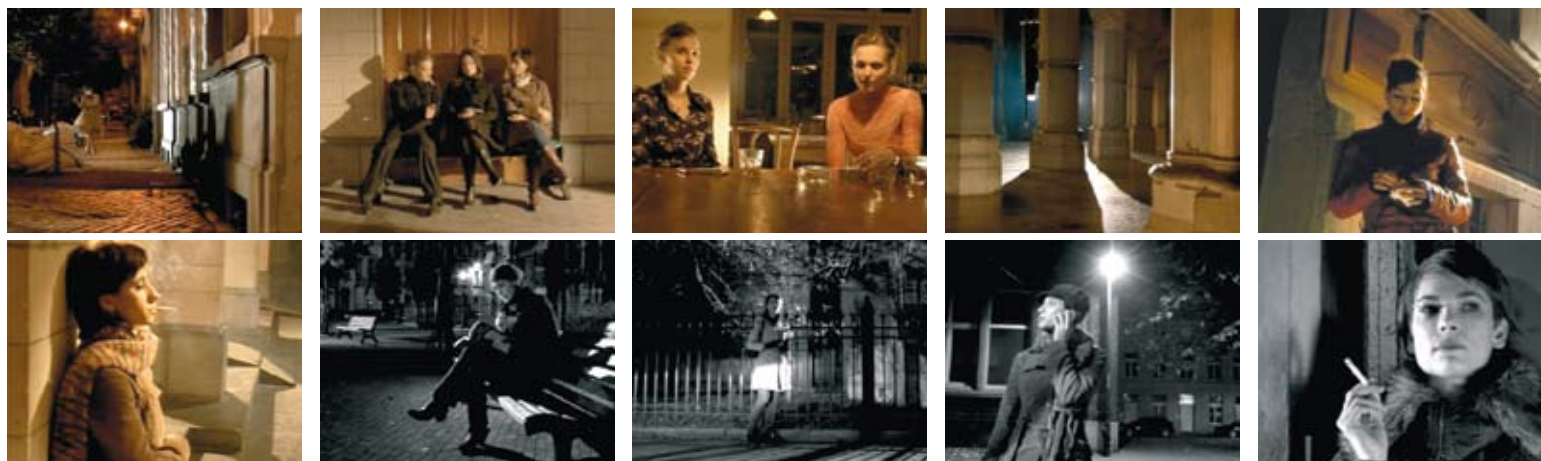
Seeing *The Square*, how can we fail to think of the face explored in the title sequence of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, 1958, as the camera moves circle-wise over the forehead, mouth, eyes, chin and cheeks? And the spiralling motif designed by Saul Bass for that sequence has its equivalent here in the curls of smoke. While this is not the first time Akerman has referred to the Anglo-Hollywoodian master of suspense, it is the first time she has done so in her work as a visual artist. Not that she

deliberately quotes or appropriates images from his legendary films; rather, she *reuses* a motif and reinvents it at the same time. Already, in 2004, the installation *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide* (To Walk Next to One’s Shoelaces in an Empty Fridge), which features again here, used this spiral theme in the space through which visitors moved both physically and with their gaze.

There are other cinephile references to be found among these women from Antwerp, these women waiting, wandering and courting. This time, though, it is Akerman’s own cinematographic universe that colours and constructs the landscape. That horizontal line of screens laying out the nocturnal labyrinth creates an equivalent to the walking that occurs in one of the masterpieces by this specialist of urban nights: *Toute une nuit* (All night long), 1982. If in that film shot in Brussels it was the alternating wanderings of the women that created the amorous and melancholy choreography of their insomnia, in *The Landscape* it is the five simultaneous images and the lateral mobility of the gaze that randomly multiply the points of view. Drunkenness, sadness, delight, concentration and many other emotions emanate from their faces and postures, adorned by the smoke from the cigarettes and glistening from the night-time dew. Desirable because their waiting resembles availability, inaccessible because their silence makes them remote, sovereign because their beauty protects them, these women perform a travelling shot that should be called *Du nord* (From the North), just as another one once filmed by Akerman is called *D’Est*.

Dominique Païni is a writer and freelance curator based in Paris.
Translated by Charles Penwarden

Femmes d’Anvers en Novembre
(Women from Antwerp in November) 2007
2 channel projection





J'ai faim, j'ai froid (I am cold, I am hungry) 1984
35mm, 12 min / B&W Production: JM Productions / Films A2

Design: James Goggin, Sara De Bondt & Grégory Ambos / Practise

Chantal Akerman was born in Brussels and currently lives and works in Paris. She has exhibited extensively throughout the world in both solo and group exhibitions. Her U.S. survey, 'Chantal Akerman: Moving through Time and Space' organised by Blaffer Gallery, the Art Museum of the University of Houston in collaboration with MIT List Visual Arts Center, the Miami Art Museum, the Contemporary Museum of Art St Louis and The Jewish Museum, San Francisco, is touring until 2010. Other solo exhibitions include 'Chantal Akerman: Spiral Autobiography', Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Israel (2006); '25e écran', Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, NJ (2006); 'Chantal Akerman', Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires/Malba, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2005); 'Chantal Akerman', École supérieure des Beaux Arts de Toulouse (2004) and her major retrospective survey, 'Chantal Akerman', Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (2003).

Her work has also been included in many group exhibitions including: 'Ellipsis: Chantal Akerman, Lilli Dujourie, and Francesca Woodman', curated by Lynne Cooke, Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo, Instituto de Bellas Artes, Mexico City (2007), Lunds Konsthall, Lund, Sweden, (2008), Dundee Contemporary Arts, Dundee, Scotland (2008); 'Faces in the Crowd', Castello Di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Turin, Italy (2005), Whitechapel Gallery, London (2004); 'Fast Forward: Media Art from the Goetz Collection', ZKM Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany (2003); 'Crossing the Line', Kunsthalle Vienna (2003); the 2002 Documenta XI, Kassel, Germany, and the 2001 Venice Biennale, as well as numerous international film festivals.


Reading/Viewing/Listening list

- Books: I love Marcel Proust, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Vasily Semyonovich Grossman and mystery novels.
- Films: Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, Jean-Luc Godard, Busby Berkeley, Alfred Hitchcock and many others.
- Music: From Bob Dylan to the Jewish songs played by Sonia Wieder-Atherton.
- My philosophy: Not much or too much. I am a last minute person.

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Je, tu, il, elle (I, you, he, she) 1975
35mm, 90min, B&W / Production: Paradise Films, Brussels

‘Life is like a fountain. Why?
Ok life is not like a fountain.’

— Chantal Akerman,
from *Histoires d’Amerique*,
(*American Histories*) 1988

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