

TAZ · *Be Streetwise* · Brigitte Werneburg · 21 February 2009

Be Streetwise!

And don't let anyone get wise to you! The filmmaker and video artist Michel Auder is showing the installation "Heads of the Town" at ScheiblerMitte. A picture book for city dweller.

Last year he was represented at the Berlinale with "The Feature", a three-hour biopic that depicted him as a filmmaker, junkie and partner of celebrities like Viva Superstar or Cindy Sherman. Now Michel Auder is back in Berlin with a solo show at ScheiblerMitte. "Heads of the Town" is the title of his installation comprising seven videos and ten photo-prints and mixed media works.

If the experimental filmmaker and co-founder of the Anthology Film Archives in New York, Jonas Mekas, calls Michel Auder a poet, then "Heads of the Town" is the *Bilderbuch für Städtebewohner* [picture book for city dwellers], to paraphrase his colleague Bertolt Brecht. What connects these authors is their poetry's utilization of a fundamental requirement in the metropolis: be streetwise. Don't let anyone get wise to you. Only in an emergency do you show how endangered – and dangerous – you are.

Since his first public screenings at the beginning of the 80s, the artist (born 1944 in Soissons, France) has shown us how endangered and dangerous he is. Only a few, however, are as streetwise as this artist, who already had his first camera as a child. In his adolescent years, he became unable to live without filming himself. Hence, it went largely unnoticed that a video camera was "always there, always going, a part of the house, a part of his life, eyes, hands," as Jonas Mekas remembers Auder, who with Viva orbited Andy Warhol's factory of the 1960s.

In Paris he was a member of Zanzibar, the group of filmmakers surrounding Philippe Garrel, also called the "Dandies of 1968". In New York in 1970 Auder bought one of the first portable video cameras, and his resulting video diaries have amassed an extensive archive of the local underground.

And yet, in "Heads of the Town" there are few references to this background: the old contact sheets in the entrance on which one recognizes John Lennon and Yoko Ono, Kris Kristofferson or the painter Alice Neel. "Shopping Heads" (1990/2009), however, portrays a short loop filmed

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through the store windows of Rome. A lucky voyeur seems to be standing right next to women in whose hands pearls and jewels trickle or expensive lingerie shimmers. Despite the probing camera, a certain detachment pervades the images and lends "Shopping Heads" – along with the other 2 to 4 minute clips – a staged quality, beyond rigorous documentation but also beyond amateurishly playful private videos.

Not everything Michel Auder films is private, even if the material is taken from his private life. Many of his works are made up of filmed television images, and rightfully so – as they are a fundamental component of the media-steeped reality of our everyday lives. And so, discernable on another row of untitled black-and-white contact sheets is a typical television screen and on this, in turn, the young Eric Bogosian (now internationally famous for "Law & Order: Criminal Intent").

Michel Auder added surprisingly few television images to "The Town" (1999). Most importantly, those one would expect to see are missing. For "The Town" he filmed the skyline of downtown Manhattan from his studio. Through the lens, he observes how airplanes and helicopters appear to float between—and sometimes directly into—the towers, including those of the World Trade Center. Because the film specifically avoids 9/11 and the burning towers (although one is certain that Michel Auder has saved these images in his archives), the "The Town" has an extremely dramatic effect. The fog blowing like smoke around the Twin Towers is enough to give one the shudders. Here, as with his other works, the artist does not use sound, a decision that heightens the exhibition's atmosphere of concentration.

The exception to the rule is rightfully titled "Talking Head" (1981). Under lush hemp plants in a kind of conservatory, a little girl is playing with a plastic wrapper and babbling away: "The thing never came back again. It wasn't the same thing. That thing. Was nice." It is a short video portrait of his daughter, whose singsong actually possesses a remarkable poetic quality. In the way of city dwellers, Michel Auder simply taps into what is happening when the girl ruminates about the thing that never came back again and with the short film indeed creates poetry.

Until March 7, Michel Auder, "Heads of the Town", Scheibler/Mitte, Charlottenstr. 2,

Tu-Sa 11 a.m. - 6 p.m.; Screenings Wednesdays: 25 Feb and 4 Mar , 8 p.m.