

# Man with a Camera

AMY TAUBIN ON MICHEL AUDER

I FIRST ENCOUNTERED Michel Auder's video work in the early 1980s. The tape that left an indelible impression depicted Auder's daughter Alexandra at age five or thereabouts watching a video of her own birth. Auder was not the first artist to record moving images of his wife giving birth; that honor almost certainly goes to Stan Brakhage. Unlike Brakhage, however, Auder did not set out to make the home movie into a high-art form. He did not mull for months, as Brakhage did, over the problem of "aesthetic distance" and whether it would evaporate if he showed explicit images of the birth process. (It was specifically the image of the afterbirth in *Window Water Baby Moving* [1959] that troubled Brakhage.) Auder simply found the most informative angles for his video camera—one shot was indeed of the placenta being expelled. Another was a head-on view between the bent legs of his wife Viva, revealing the baby crowning in her vagina, part of the sequence that Alexandra was watching when her father videotaped her years later. What makes Auder an extremely interesting moving-image maker—one who intuited almost immediately that the inevitable ubiquity of video cameras would transform social relations and individual psyches—is not that he thought to shoot his daughter's birth and to use the footage in one of the many diaristic videos he has produced over the past forty years. No, it's that he would consider *reusing* that footage, redefining it in terms of who is looking at it. One has to think about what it means for a child to

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witness her own birth on a TV screen—what divisions between public and private, clarity and obscurity, known and unknown, parent and child, were breached at the moment in which that follow-up, but by no means secondary, video-within-a-video image was recorded.

Born in the small French town of Soissons in 1944, Auder began his career as a fashion photographer in Paris, worked with the experimental Zanzibar film

group, and met and fell in love with Viva when she and actor Louis Waldon came to Paris in 1969, the two of them notorious for their hard-core coupling in Andy Warhol's *Blue Movie* (1968), the sweetest, most touching movie Warhol ever made. Auder shot a film (using both 16 mm and 35 mm) with Viva and Waldon titled *Keeping Busy* (1969), which, like his earlier work on film, is probably mostly lost. He then followed Viva to New York and moved in with her at the Chelsea Hotel, where he met the experimental narrative filmmaker Shirley Clarke. That same year, he and Clarke bought a Sony Porta-Pak, the first widely marketed consumer-grade video recorder—the legendary, heavy, clumsy, analog progenitor of today's HD models.

Among the most significant aspects of Auder's extensive body of work (reflected in his current retrospective at Lunds Konsthall in Sweden and in a three-gallery minisurvey in New York this past spring at Zach Feuer, Newman Popiashvili, and Participant Inc) is that it encompasses the entire history of the branch of video technology that was intended for use outside the network-television industry. One room of the small Bushwick studio where Auder has worked for the past eleven years is crammed with outdated hardware: Porta-Pak, three-quarter-inch Numatic, Betamax, Video8, Hi8. Auder keeps the stuff around not just for sentimental reasons but because he needs it to look at work he has not yet upgraded to digital. Early in the decade, he digitized four thousand hours of video, loaded it onto hard drives, and installed Final Cut on his computer. Auder says that for several years he hardly shot any new video, spending most of his time working with what was already "inside." When he again turned his eye to the outside world, it was mostly through mobile-phone cameras.

The combination of precise, sophisticated editing technology and low-end cameras has yielded a twenty-two-minute piece unlike any of Auder's work I've seen before. Titled *Narcolepsy* (2010) and shown in New



Michel Auder, *Narcolepsy*, 2010, stills from a color video, 22 minutes 48 seconds.

York at Newman Popiashvili (Auder used some of the same footage in his installation *Dinner Is Served* at Krabbesholm Højskole, Skive, Denmark, earlier this year), the video revolves figuratively if not quite literally around the image of a young woman, fast asleep, sitting upright on what might be a restaurant banquet. The piece is made up of multiple layers of superimposed imagery and twelve layered tracks of sound. The low-res picture recalls Super 8 film, but the colors are softer without appearing washed-out. The texture of the image, particularly in the close-ups of the woman's face, evokes the cracked, varnished surfaces of old-master paintings. Superimposition was used extensively by avant-garde filmmakers in the '50s and '60s, sometimes to economize (it was cheaper to roll back the film in the camera and record two or three times on a single



Michel Auder and Andrew Neel, *The Feature*, 2008, stills from a color video, 180 minutes.

strip) and partly to counteract traditional film linearity. But whereas film superimpositions yield a flattened space, Auder's swirling images seem immeasurably deep and vertiginous. Opposites attract: A pet rabbit bounding across a bed is paired with a wild rabbit dangling from the jaws of a wolf loping across the snow to join its pack. The four elements are forces to be reckoned with, but water dominates—pouring from faucets, condensing on windows. A group of naked men clamber from the sea onto a rocky shore. Toward the end of the piece, two little girls venture alone into a stream, the camera dipping with them into the shallows. On the densely mixed audio track, where such anxiety-producing factors as sirens, closely miked rushing water, and gasping breaths converge, the last thing we hear is Auder's urgent voice calling to them, "Come back!"

*Narcolepsy* fits squarely into the avant-garde genre of film-as-dream, but no other cinematic dreamscape in film or video looks quite like it or mingles the fierce and the ephemeral in such a quietly unsettling manner. And though its control and polish distinguish it from

Auder's previous work, *Narcolepsy* carries on the videographer's undeviating strategy of adapting new technology to his personal vision. When Clarke and Auder bought their Porta-Pak, they intended to use it to make narrative features, but they quickly discovered that even in the world of underground film, the softly defined black-and-white images yielded by this primitive apparatus were considered inadequate to their ambition. Auder had already shot a second feature on film, the Viva vehicle *Cleopatra* (1970), but lost control of it in a dispute with the producers. The Porta-Pak, however crude, gave him autonomy, and he began to carry it everywhere, just as the avant-garde film diarists (Jonas Mekas, Warren Sonbert, and Andrew Noren, among many others) were doing with their 16-mm cameras. He recorded his daily domestic life and his extensive travels, made portraits of close friends, and entered into collaborations on quasi fictions with underground writers and performers. He spent months shooting anonymous passersby from his window (e.g., *Rooftops and Other Scenes* [1996] and *Blind Sex* [2009]), and he turned his

camera on his TV set to record the Olympics when he was denied direct access (*The Games [Olympic Variation]* [1986]). Over the forty years that he has treated his video recorders as naturalized extensions of his eyes and ears, using them to navigate the world, his basic method has remained the same: He collects images and sounds, then files them away, waiting months, years, decades to shape them into pieces—works of art. His most recent videography lists close to one hundred titles running anywhere from three minutes to three hours in length. Much like Mekas's film diaries, they constitute a history of the underground and downtown art world, but Auder's predilections took him into a not unrelated sex-and-drugs demimonde where Mekas never ventured.

Until the 1990s, Auder's work was shown only in alternative-media spaces, and there only sporadically. His first solo exhibition in a commercial gallery in the US was at Nicole Klagsbrun in New York in 1994. That show's centerpiece was one of Auder's most incisive and moving pieces, *Voyage to the Center of the Phone*

*Lines* (1993). In it, Auder juxtaposes intercepts of anonymous mobile-phone conversations with a seascape—sand, water, the sun, the moon, wandering birds, not a human in sight. The images evoke an accepted universality, the timeless natural world; the audio evokes something perhaps no less timeless: the human psyche. People fret obsessively to one another about their sex lives, their children, the frailties of their bodies, the anxiety in their voices revealing their inchoate sense of mortality.

There are several ways to account for the growing interest in Auder's work over the past fifteen years by the museum/gallery/art-fair system. The ascendancy of video has led to an expansion of the parameters of "art video" beyond the formalism and structuralism that were institutionalized in the first decades of the medium. Auder accounts for his current relative success from a diametrically opposite position, citing television's relaxation of technical standards as changing the kind of images that everyone—not just the art world—is willing to accept on video screens. And, like Warhol, who makes several notable appearances in Auder's diaries, including an extremely creepy one in *Chelsea Girls with Andy Warhol* (1971–76), Auder is a visionary for the age of webcams and cell-phone cameras.

If his oeuvre is in part a public history, it is also an autobiography, as he makes evident in *The Feature* (2008), a three-hour narrative directed by Auder and Andrew Neel, grandson of the painter Alice Neel (Auder's close friend and the subject of several of his most complex and caring video portraits). The movie's presumptively fictional framework—the sixty-five-year-old Auder is shown to have brain cancer and is given but a few months to live—motivates him to review his life and work, primarily his marriages to Viva and Cindy Sherman, his relationships with his daughters and with his current lover, and his long friendships with Neel and Waldon, among others. Among the many purposes of this thoroughly engrossing though occasionally awkward movie are to demonstrate that there is no lensed fiction that is not a documentary and vice versa; to act as a highlight reel of Auder's digitally spiffed-up videos; to allow the artist to reflect on his life through his own representations of it; and, disconcertingly, to allow him to write his own epitaph while he is still very much alive and kicking up a storm of work at home and abroad. □

"The World Out of My Hands," a retrospective of Michel Auder's work, is on view at Lunds Konsthall in Sweden through November 14.

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