

Facing the Image is the first exhibition of works by Chantal Akerman entirely conceived by her close collaborator and editor Claire Atherton. It offers us a journey through visual and audio material installed in the space, inviting each visitor to find his or her own path through an open-ended encounter with the image.

Chantal Akerman

FACING THE IMAGE

18.11.2023 – 14.04.2024



[LA VIRREINA]
CENTRE
DE LA IMATGE

Ajuntament de
Barcelona



Chantal Akerman, *D'Est*, 1993

Courtesy of Fondation Chantal Akerman and Marian Goodman Gallery

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Conversation between Claire Atherton and Valentín Roma at La Virreina Centre de la Imatge, on June 27, 2023, on the occasion of the exhibition Facing the Image.

VALENTÍN ROMA: If it's okay with you, I'd like to start by asking you how you understand the task of film editing and how you worked with Chantal Akerman, what your methodology was. Then we could focus more specifically on the installations you created together. And finally, I'd like to talk about the selection of projects you've made for La Virreina Centre de la Imatge.

CLAIRE ATHERTON: I'm glad you started with this question because in fact I used the same methodology—if there is one—to compose this exhibition that I used when I was editing films and installations with Chantal. The process is to trust the feeling, and to rely on an organic approach to the work rather than a conceptual one. The key to my work with Chantal—and this is something I continue to do with other filmmakers and artists—was to discover the work as we created it, and to “understand” afterwards. By the way, it's interesting to question what we mean by “understanding.” The real meaning of understanding is not to decode, but to enter into a pact in which each person can develop their own experience. Think, for example, of the original meaning of the word *understand*—in French, *comprendre*, which means “to carry with us.” One of the essential aspects of my work as a film editor is to leave space for the viewers so they're not swallowed up by images, or overwhelmed by a form of narration that makes them forget their own existence. In this sense, it's essential to create a space that involves our body, in which emotions and feelings can arise and lead us to different layers of meaning.

An important stage in my work is finding the beginning of the film. From the beginning of the film, I try to create a tension that invites the viewer to jump into the unknown, to accept to get lost, to work, to move, to build his or her own relationship to the film while discovering it. As I said, cinema doesn't only

work with the brain but with one's entire being. It goes to the most intimate part of ourselves, and that's probably how it can reach the soul.

My philosophy as an editor is to try to find the truth of each film. If you reach the truth, you reach something that is common to all of us, something related to the essence of being human.

VR: The way you question the notion of meaning is very interesting. Can you tell me more?

CA: Of course. When I was young, I had a very complicated relationship with words. I was always worried that when you verbally recount an experience you've had, some things disappear in the process and others appear. Which means that in a sense you end up lying, or distorting the experience. When we tell a story that happened to us, we apparently have to rely on a certain logic, despite the fact that while it was taking place we weren't operating in any kind of stable, well-defined coherent state, we were going through an experiential process. That's why I felt that words were dangerous. On the contrary, I had more confidence in images, because they could be a manifestation of what in French we call *le réel*, which would be a truer, more contradictory, more vivid presence.

This probably explains why I've always been interested in Chinese writing, which is composed of ideograms and creates meaning by combining images. In the Chinese language, there's a contradiction between the need for linearity—it's necessary to build a sentence to talk—and the desire to escape from that same linearity.

VR: In Spanish, there's a wonderful word, *errar*, which has two distinct and somewhat opposite meanings: "to behave wrongly" and "to wander around without direction".

CA: Oh, that's beautiful. The duality of certain words is fantastic! I love when language is not authoritarian, and leaves space for the listeners...

Which brings me back to the Chinese way of thinking and the notion of emptiness. When I was studying Chinese civilization, I was struck by a story. The painters of Chinese antiquity considered nature so beautiful and complex that it was useless to try and faithfully reproduce it. They decided to paint in black and white in order to allow viewers to imagine the colors. It's this space that is left to our imagination that sets us in motion, sparks our thoughts, and creates our own relationship to the work. The painter doesn't know any better than the viewer. He is searching.

I follow these principles in editing. Too often people think that when you edit you have to start by working on the narrative by finding the film's structure, and then move on to the film's rhythm by refining the length of the shots and sequences. I find that impossible. That would be like separating content from form, thought from the perceptible. Rhythm is the heart of the film, its breath. It's also the association of colors, shapes, and lines. If the rhythm is right, you can feel the tremors and vibrations, the nearly impalpable movements that appear within a shot, and be moved by them without knowing why. These are the emotions that construct the narrative.

I'd like to add one thing. About 15 years ago, I was on a festival jury and I was asked why I became an editor. I answered that I didn't really choose. I didn't decide to be an editor when I was young. I didn't follow a career path. Many things led me to be an editor, including my conflictual relationship with words and my interest in Chinese philosophy. Probably the most important thing that allowed me to build my life was an openness to surprises and encounters, to following my passions even if they seemed disconnected from what is referred to as reality, to letting things happen without knowing exactly where I was going. And I have the feeling that editing a film is the same process as building a life: you try, you experiment, you discover, and then you understand. I think excessive planning or determination kills art... And cinema is an art! People tend to forget that...

VR: I'd like to comment on an idea I read in one of your texts. You talked about silence during the editing process, about the need to construct a space of enunciation for the images during those moments in which a film is being edited.

CA: Yes. Sometimes it's frightening to jump into the emptiness, so our reflex is to search for reasons for what we're doing, we start to explain, to speak words to put a stop to that fear. Because we need to be reassured. But that can stop the movement of creation. The most telling example I can think of was when we were editing *D'Est* [*From the East*] (1993). Chantal and I didn't tell each other what the images we were seeing brought to our minds. We were getting into what they really are, into their expression. I think if we had said: "That makes me think of other moments in history when people were waiting or being displaced from one area to another", if we had tried to name those things, if we had asked ourselves psychological or contextual questions, it would have weighed down our choices. I believe that if you work with the images while respecting their secret, their inner force, and that you don't lock them into a particular meaning, you preserve the mystery of what you're constructing. Then you offer the viewer the possibility to share this depth, and you give the film a wider horizon, freed of excessive specificity.

Another way in which words are dangerous is that if you're too conscious of why you're putting images together and what you want the film to convey, you'll no longer be able to discover it by watching it with the filmmaker during the filmmaking process, and you'll no longer be able to forget it. When you make a film, you work with memory but also—and very much so—with forgetting. You must forget what's been made, because otherwise it takes up all the space in your mind and body, and you lose the relationship with the film emerging. Instead of discovering something and letting the film guide you, you limit your action to checking your own process, without any surprises.

VR: Let's move to the next part of our conversation. How did your work with installations begin?

CA: Chantal and I always tried to free ourselves from the linearity of storytelling, and the installations allowed that in a fascinating way. Our first installation, *D'EST, au bord de la fiction* [*From the East, Bordering on Fiction*] (1995)—a title I love—was made after the film *D'Est* was edited, so the film already existed. First, we watched the film on two monitors placed side by side, playing with modifying the amount of time by which the two images were out of phase with each other, and we tried to feel what that created. It was beautiful, but we soon felt that the images were locked in a binary relationship. When we added a third image, we could feel we were on the right path. In fact, in the Chinese tradition, “one” represents unity, “two” duality, and “three” takes us toward infinity. Once they were gathered in threes, the images recovered their power, they were in conversation with each other. A network of resonances started to appear. We composed eight triptychs this way, in other words a total of 24 screens. It was a thrilling process, which added a new dimension to the task of editing. We were building links, echoes and tensions, not only in time, but in space, a space of resonance created by putting the images next to each other. We had the feeling that we could totally free ourselves from linearity.

What I found really beautiful in this process of making installations is that it stemmed from a very powerful awareness of the belief that you can never say everything about a world, that there isn't only a single truth, but that what you can do is share experience. This belief is what leads us to the necessity for fragmentation.

VR: What you're describing is fascinating, Claire...

CA: Some of the installations were made from existing films, while others were made from new images, so the process wasn't always the same. Going back to *D'EST, au bord de la fiction*, once the eight triptychs were finished, the initial layout

consisted of a first room where the 16 mm film was projected and a second space with the triptychs. We imagined that once the triptychs were arranged in space, they would create a path or rather proposals for paths that the viewer could try out. However, it seemed to us that these 24 screens were not enough. We had to add something to create tension. Then we realized that a third room was needed—again the number three—and that’s how we came to create what we call the 25th image, where Chantal’s words appeared in one of her most beautiful texts, which is entitled *The 25th image*.

Our work on *D’EST, au bord de la fiction* was a kind of “bricolage”, in the sense that we had to invent a way of working, different from what we did when we edited films. In fact, for each installation, we needed to invent a mode of operation, a methodology. This inventing became a part of the process. Each time, we found a different way of setting ourselves up in Chantal’s apartment, drawing handmade sketches and placing screens or speakers throughout the room. It was really a very exciting feeling of freedom.

I think I had to go through Taoist philosophy to understand Chantal’s relationship with images and, from there, to establish that strong connection with her. Perhaps it’s also related to Jewish philosophy, which is about questioning more than answering, and which deals with space more than with representation. It’s as if I had understood something about the danger of idolatry through Taoism and Chinese painting and poetry. In any case, that was the path we followed to arrive at that first installation.

VR: In your installations, the viewer is a very important part of the work itself. How do you incorporate the viewer, how do you leave space for them to relate to the images and, perhaps at the same time, demand their involvement?

CA: In fact, the way we created that space for the viewer in the installations wasn’t that different from the way we were creating it in the film editing process. It’s related to the necessity of establishing horizontal relationships between the so-called



Chantal Akerman, *Je tu il elle, l'installation*, 2007

Installation view, Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris, 2021

Photo Rebecca Fanuele

Courtesy of Fondation Chantal Akerman and Marian Goodman Gallery

Chantal Akerman, *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide*, 2004

Installation view, Camden Arts Museum London, 2008

Museum photo

Courtesy of Fondation Chantal Akerman and Marian Goodman Gallery



Chantal Akerman, *D'EST, au bord de la fiction*, 1995

Installation view, at the Eye Filmmuseum Amsterdam, 2020

Photo Studiohanswilschut

Courtesy of Fondation Chantal Akerman and Marian Goodman Gallery



Chantal Akerman, *La Chambre*, 2007

Installation view, La Ferme du Buisson Noisiel, 2016

Photo Emile Ouroumov

Courtesy of Fondation Chantal Akerman and Marian Goodman Gallery

Chantal Akerman, *A Voice in The Desert*, 2002

Still of the installation

© Fondation Chantal Akerman

Courtesy of Fondation Chantal Akerman and Marian Goodman Gallery

creator and the viewer. We were discovering the film while making it, so we didn't know any more than the viewer. Similarly, Chantal never looked at the people she filmed from above. Her gaze was not an expert's gaze, but on the contrary the gaze of somebody who didn't know, but was listening. Someone once said that a book doesn't exist without a reader. I think the same is true for a film or an artwork. Today we don't trust the viewer enough. If a film breathes, the viewer can be involved in it.

That's why it's very important for me to convey that no previous conceptual knowledge is needed to jump into Chantal Akerman's work or to discover her films. Perhaps the only thing necessary is for us all to be ready not to know.

VR: Something caught my attention about the exhibition: it begins with a prelude and ends with a sort of tribute. I'd like to know if these two moments, the beginning and end, are connected, and if so, why.

CA: That's an interesting question. There is indeed a link, but this link was transformed during the process of creating the exhibition. First, I'd like to make clear that the tribute is not a work by Chantal. It's a few words I wrote for her soon after her death. I worked on conceiving the exhibition the same way I worked on the films and installations, which is to say by taking into account the space in which the exhibition would be constructed, the way the different works fit together and how they breathed and resonated with each other. My final choices were not made according to an abstract idea or a conceptual decision. Because I work like this, sometimes I have to change my initial approach because of the space, or maybe thanks to it. Which explains why I changed what I originally thought we would do, so that in fact we now don't enter the exhibition through *My Mother Laughs Prelude* (2012) but through *La Chambre* (2007).

VR: Although it eludes my previous question, I find what you've done very interesting, given that beginning the exhi-

bition with *My Mother Laughs Prelude* was perhaps too literal and, above all, because I've always understood *La Chambre* as an irruption, someone who bursts into a space. This work by Chantal also seems to me to be a diary, a spatial diary.

CA: Yes, I love what you're saying! Also, I thought about *La Chambre* as a circle, a loop, perpetual motion. It's as if it was inviting us to move. So I think it's a much more interesting entrance to the exhibition than the *Prelude*, which is now close to the end, right before the tribute.

VR: And I think you relate the rhythms of the images to the rhythms of the readings, which is fundamental in the exhibitions. Because when you start with *La Chambre* the movement is circular; then in *Tombée de nuit sur Shanghai* (2009), it's a way of remaining in place, of being present; and then you come to the photographs *Untitled D'Est* (1998) and *Là-bas* (2006). There are three different rhythms that are complementary and yet at the same time distinct.

CA: I totally agree. And that echoes with the name of this place, "Centre de la Imatge", and with the name of the exhibition "Facing the Image," which is about being present. There's also the fact that *Tombée de nuit sur Shanghai* asks "What is an image?" When you see Mona Lisa and Mickey Mouse next to each other, on the same level, without any hierarchization, just as Chopin's music is mixed with American music of the 1970-80s, it causes a kind of ambiguous pleasure. There are images everywhere, everything becomes a screen: the boats, the buildings... But there is a kind of danger in this pleasure. The danger of being swallowed up. That's why we added the two fish lamps on the floor: to help the viewer find his or her distance, and reflect about images that are like totems.

The other thing that interests me about the sequencing of these two pieces is working with the contrast between them. *La Chambre* is silent and very intimate, since you see Chantal eating an apple in her bed, and the camera turns to show her

several times. *Tombée de nuit sur Shanghai* is full of virtual, flashing, magical images and loud music. The project originated with Chantal being asked to make a film for the omnibus film *The State of the World* (2007), which also featured the directors Aisha Abraham, Wang Bing, Pedro Costa, Vicente Ferraz, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul. She felt the need to go as far as possible, to somewhere she'd never been before, in order to feel something about the state of the world. Which is why she went to Shanghai. When you put *La Chambre* next to *Shanghai*, you have a different feeling about the flashing images, and a different relationship with the ambiguous pleasure of the towers of Shanghai. It questions the notions of exterior-interior, far-close, the intimate and the collective.

VR: Moreover, these three installations place three crucial aspects of Akerman's work at the center of the exhibition right from the outset: the act of remaining observant as a kind of aesthetic and political principle, a certain stretching of time, that rupture of linearity—in this case of the exhibition, as we mentioned earlier—and a beauty that lies in doing the exact opposite of what's expected.

Finally, perhaps what fascinates me most about your curatorial project is that you haven't established an unequivocal relation between the legibility of a work and that of a room, but rather it's an exhibition that involves the corporeal, that will require a bodily response from those who visit it.

CA: Thank you very much!

VR: Let's talk about *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide* (2004) and this idea of the diary and writing, which I see as extremely important since an image is also what narrates the image. I'm a writer and some of my novels are diaries. It seems that one writes a diary solely for oneself, that is to say, for nobody.

CA: Chantal's work is full of what she calls *le manque*, the lack of something. Or nothingness. Her whole relationship

with images is built on this feeling there are gaps in her memory and her history. This installation began with something that remains; “the only thing left” as Chantal’s mother used to say. It’s the diary that Chantal’s grandmother wrote in 1920 when she was 15 years old, and which begins with “I am a woman.” Chantal’s grandmother was deported to Auschwitz and exterminated there when she was 40 years old. In the installation, some pages of the diary are projected onto a transparent tulle that allows you to see the wall behind it. A diptych of black and white blurred images of a dialogue between mother and daughter is projected on the wall. Or one could say the dialogue is between daughter and granddaughter, if you consider it from the grandmother’s perspective. The daughter, Chantal, gives the diary to her mother, and asks her to read it to her in Polish and translate it.

Chantal asks her mother to tell her about the camps, and her mother tries to answer. They also talk about their lives, about being a woman, about the grandmother’s paintings, and about history. This conversation was filmed as part of the behind-the-scenes film for *Demain on déménage* [*Tomorrow We Move*] (2004), a feature film based on the same diary. When we discovered the rushes of the interview, we didn’t like the image. It was too hard and sharp; we didn’t feel it breathing. So first I edited the conversation, and then we played the image on two old black and white televisions and re-filmed it. That’s how we built the triptych. On the tulle, you see the grandmother’s paintings and the beginning of the diary, and then a short letter from Chantal’s mother to her mother, ending with “protect me”. Then the two daughters, Chantal and her sister Sylviane, write their own letter to their mother. Maybe I’m going into too much detail, but I just wanted to say that this diary is the heart of the installation, and the motivation for it.

VR: Now, the final installation, *A Voice in the Desert* (2002). I was surprised by the biblical reference in the title. I immediately thought of Moses and of two texts: Marguerite

Duras's novel *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* [*The Sea Wall*] (1950), where she describes her mother shouting at the ocean every night because colonial officials had tricked her into buying land that flooded when the tide came in. Duras wrote that her mother was so full of the sense of injustice that she could no longer speak, she could only scream. It also made me think of Sigmund Freud's wonderful essay on Michelangelo's *Moses*.

CA: *A Voice in the Desert* is the third room of another installation, *From the Other Side*, which was created for Documenta 11 in Kassel and which follows more or less the same three-room arrangement—though not the same principle—as *D'EST, au bord de la fiction*. Chantal had this vision of a giant screen in the desert, on the border between the United States and Mexico. That's the image that led us to construct the other rooms. The title of this last room came much later. But maybe there's some kind of link to Moses and the crossing of the desert.

VR: In closing, can we talk about *Je tu il elle, l'installation* (2007), which is based on the 1974 film?

CA: This piece has rarely been shown: once when we made it, in 2007 in Mexico, and again in 2022 at the Marian Goodman Gallery in Paris. The film is split into three parts shown side by side. When you see the different scenes in the same space, they speak to each other in a very different way than when you see them one after the other. The viewer is less focused on the storytelling and more on the presence of the images.

VR: Thank you very much, Claire

CA: Thank you. I'd like to add something about the exhibition title. As I told you before, when we were working, we never knew what we were looking for. Everything we did was intuitive.

And each time, when the work was finished we would realize that we were “facing”: facing the image and facing the person who would watch it. I think that’s the key to our work. From the moment there is a face to face, the Other exists, he or she is not swallowed up, he or she has his own experience and is respected as a human being.

Thank you very much for inviting me to make this exhibition.

Curator: Claire Atherton

Cinema Zumzeig will offer a film series
by Chantal Akerman from November 24th,
2023 to March 5th, 2024

24.11.2023 | 7.15 pm
Je tu il elle

25.01.2024 | 7 pm
News from Home

01.02.2024 | 7 pm
Les Rendez-vous d'Anna

08.02.2024 | 6.45 pm
D'Est
Special session with Claire Atherton

13.02.2024 | 7 pm
Sur

20.02.2024 | 7 pm
De l'autre côté

27.02.2024 | 7 pm
Là-bas

05.03.2024 | 7 pm
Demain on déménage

Zumzeig Cinecooperativa
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La Virreina Centre de la Imatge
Palau de la Virreina
La Rambla, 99. 08002 Barcelona

Opening hours: Tuesday to Sunday
and public holidays, 11 am to 8 pm
Free entry



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@lavrreïnaci

barcelona.cat/lavrreïna