

Portrait of the Marauder:**Michel Auder in Conversation with Adam Szymczyk**

Adam Szymczyk: Video and, less so, film are both handy formats in which to record material and then use it later. Yet how did you manage to keep going over the years without having solid backing?

Michel Auder: That is probably why I went in the direction that I did. In the seventies it did not seem like I was able to, or was interested in, finding money the traditional way: to have an idea, to write it down, and to present it to someone in the film business. All those steps never came about, except with the last film I made, *Cleopatra* [1970]. Video is a way to actually make the films and not make it. You just do it and then it is there. At least you are doing something; you are making a work.

AS: Keeping busy.

MA: Making film is vital for me: explaining what I am seeing or how I feel about what is around me. The material question about having backing, I cannot answer. I am a very lucky and determined person to have managed to make all those films without any funds. It is kind of a miracle.

AS: With *Cleopatra* you were trying to go into something that was more like regular film production, right? Did you pitch it to people who had funds to produce your film?

MA: In 1969 I was featured in the *New York Times* with my first wife, Viva. There was a long article that said, among other things, that I was ready to make a new film. The *Sunday Times* was so popular that I got called up by producers. They asked me about my project and I said that I was going to remake *Cleopatra*. I did not have a script or anything. I took a history book for schoolchildren and made up a script. I found a producer that was willing to make the film, using Warholian actors such as Viva, Taylor Mead, Louis Waldon, Ultra Violet, and Ondine. These actors possessed a talent to make up stories. I put them in different environments and told them: You are Caesar, you are Cleopatra, and they started to improvise who they were and who they would become.

AS: Was it scripted?

MA: It was more a choice of different situations, environments, and places. I would say: This is the queen's summer palace in the wintertime, and then we went to Rome and visited Caesar in his winter palace. Everyone would more or less improvise their lines. It was about the political aspect of power. Nobody did anything, really, they would just hang around and act like politicians, more and more abusive, self important and make fun of things.

AS: Would you go as far as to say that this was a film that rose out of disillusionment of a certain kind? It was 1970, so this is the moment when the summer is over, so to speak.

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MA: Over and over again the same things happened, wars and everything else, showing the arrogance and incompetence of the governing classes. Cleopatra is about the behavior of the politicians controlling the world in general but, of course, it is not precisely that. And the film is degenerated in a good way. The actors are taking drugs but they are acting like they have so much power: they have whims, slaves, etcetera. The actors that I chose were very smart and through their way of expressing themselves one can feel almost like it is the end of the world.

AS: How long were you busy with that production?

MA: A couple of months. I wanted it to be my last film, and I upset the producers so much that they destroyed the negatives as far as I know. Only a cheaply made work copy was left. We agreed that I would make the movie if they gave me carte blanche. They said yes, and then I pushed the envelope. They finally sent some supplemental crew to help me, like spies, and they reported that I did not know how to make films. Then I was invited to the Cannes Film Festival by Henri Langlois. The film was in the process of being edited, I felt it was fine, so I took it and brought a copy to the festival. They said you cannot do that, it is not finished; I said no, I know when it is finished and I know when it starts. They sued the festival and told them they owned the film. And then I played the bad guy, and then they also started to play the bad guys. Some powerful lawyer came, a friend of a friend, and he talked them out of suing me. They said if I gave them the footage, they would drop the lawsuit. It became a childish game of me saying I do not give a fuck about you, and of them saying I do not give a fuck about you.

AS: It sounds almost proverbial, this brush with the powers of industry that take from you the fruit of your work. That sounds like a film in itself.

MA: Yes, and I wanted it to be my last film.

AS: You wanted to make your last film in 1970, which in some sense was the beginning of your career. In your work there is the issue of time and of time delay, and calling certain moments last moments that happen very late or very early. It sometimes seems like time is falling apart slightly. In films like *My Last Bag of Heroin (For Real)*, which was shot in 1986, and released in 1993, there is the issue of double-dating; and then this titular statement that something is going to be the last thing but then, is it really? And then there are also the first things, for example in *My First Pipe of Opium Since 1973 (Mexico Nov. 2004)*, which was edited in 2005. I am interested in these different timelines in your work, and how you declare one of your first films your last film. It is the last one, yes, but after that you made a lot of films. You started making films with your last film.

MA: Cleopatra was my last film where I would deal with the system. Up to that point I made a few films and I was thinking they would go into movie theaters proper, not into the art world.

AS: Until 1970 you were aiming

MA: Being an independent yet mainstream filmmaker. Since '63 or '64.

AS: When did you arrive in the US?

MA: I settled there permanently in '69.

AS: So already in France you had made some films.

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MA: I made a couple of movies there that are lost, because I didn't really have a home in France. The films were very cumbersome and heavy, and I left them with someone that wanted to include them in a festival in Switzerland in early 1969, just before I left for the US. And then I never returned to France. The films were the black-and-white, 35mm *Anne vad des saisons* [1963]; the 16mm, color *Krylon* [1966]; and *Lune X* [1968], also 16mm and color. Years later when I became interested in getting my films back, I could not remember the name of this man nor of the festival.

AS: I am sure that they are still in Switzerland. When did you first put your hands on a video camera?

MA: At the end of 1969, with my friend, the filmmaker Shirley Clarke, who also lived in the Chelsea Hotel in New York. Woody and Steina Vasulka had bought a Sony Portapak. We heard about it, and became interested. They lived in a loft in dark SoHo. Only artists lived there at the time; it was desolate at night. We went to their studio and experimented with their equipment. I had received some of the money from *Cleopatra* it was a big budget, like \$200,000 dollars, which would be almost a million dollars now and I bought this video equipment: a camera, the deck, and tapes. And the rest is history.

AS: How would you cut material?

MA: I did not have editing equipment for many years. Home-editing equipment didn't exist. You would have had to go into a television studio, hire an editor, and it was too expensive. The only way to edit was to transfer between two decks. I would have one tape running on a player that was connected to another player/recorder. I would hit the record button when I liked a scene from the original footage. It was on-the-fly editing and recording. My invention.

AS: So you didn't begin shooting video because of Andy Warhol and the fact that he was getting video equipment to experiment with.

MA: There was no affordable, portable, color-video equipment until around 1977. There was only black-and-white television up to late 1960, then America began having color television.

AS: Speaking of television: Do you remember when you first filmed a TV screen and used it in a film?

MA: Right away. If a television is there I enter it like anything else that I film. TV is presenting me with an image and I reframe it. In my hotel right now in Basel, *Les Trois Rois*, there are forty-three channels available. Two nights ago I arrived at one in the morning, and at five in the morning I was still filming television. I did not realize so many hours had gone by; I just went on like crazy entering images and sounds into my phone.

AS: Ferdinand Kriwet, an artist living in East Germany, did films that exclusively used television imagery. He did one with the coverage of the Apollo landing [*Apollovision*, 1969], and one about the Nixon election [*Campaign*, 1972/73]. It is a very fast montage of aggressive images and sound from American television in black and white. Your works fucked with television in a much less formally rigid way, so somehow they were more free in changing the parameters of the images that you worked with. But the interests are not dissimilar: the political message, the ability of television to actually fabricate an event, be it the moon landing or the election of a new

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that tells you what you are going to do.

MA: Right. I could not explain it better than you just did now.

AS: This narcoleptic person is a central organizing metaphor or device of your film, and the rest gets organized around it. From there you can imagine to build

MA: A world.

AS: A world from different building blocks that you have at hand, or that you invent, or find in the making. Which is a complete reversal of the traditional process of making a film, which usually begins with an idea of where you want to get to, and then preparing everything to reach this final image.

MA: Yes, absolutely.

AS: But you start right from the entrails of this.

MA: I go back to the trail. Narcolepsy became a sort of voyage through sleeping.

AS: One could say that these ideas of travel or voyage in your work have something to do with progress, exploration, and reaching unknown lands, but I have the feeling that the way you use these metaphors is very much about a reversed movement. You have these titles *Voyage to the Center of the Phone Lines*, for instance and various other films in which this movement is not going to somewhere, but is more an inward trip of a kind.

But your titles often point to your position. And that's why I would like to get to this staking of the position of the author, this idea of self-portraiture, in your films. There are a couple of films and more—

AS: Yet you often break through the shell of the pop-cultural stuff into something rather existential, which operates via symbols and allegories, and which reaches into the inner of the human being, be it people that are close to you or those you only met through the camera lens.

MA: I did not ever formulate the way I started making films. I just always felt that I looked at things differently. I have my kind of style of vision and I have the feeling. I always understood that I could make different films, not the traditional ones, but films by other methods. But I also think that it has to do with having been raised in a world of poetry. I start with a vague idea, and then I add images and sound, one after the other, and it becomes a piece that becomes a title that sums it up or not. I begin without thinking about what it is or will be. And then I enter all the bits that I have filmed, that are in my head, and put them together. One of my last films, *Narcolepsy* [2010], occurred because of that woman I shot. She was always sleeping in clubs it started the whole idea for the film. I think it has more to do with poetic license.

AS: For me this has to do with the power of the image, which makes you follow or explore it. If you say that this film, for instance, started with the image of one who repeatedly falls, then this is not an image that is at the end of the process, not an image you construct, but a found image that tells you what you are going to do.

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But your titles often point to your position. And that's why I would like to get to this staking of the position of the author, this idea of self-portraiture, in your films. There are a couple of films that begin with the word *My* like *My Last Bag Of Heroin (For Real)* [1986], *My Last Buck* [1972], *My Love* [1980], *My Nerves are About to Snap* [1979]. It is a very confessional thing. And then there are the films that are dedicated to someone, like *Made for Nicole K.* [1994] and *Made for Denise* [1977]. So there seems to be, apart from this interest in the world at large beginning with poetic images found somewhere out there, also another rapport between you and your subject, which is a very intimate one.

MA: Making portraits of people interests me. Suddenly I gain access to a person who becomes my friend and trusts me, and does not pay attention to my filming. They will just converse with me and let me do. At first we have to be friends; I have to gain their trust. Then the door is open and I am almost invisible. But in some way self-portraiture is also prevalent in my work, especially when *My* is involved in a title. I see my entire body of work as some kind of self-portrait. Friends, the places where I live, my choices of images, of moods, and of subject matter: the sum of it all is a portrait of the maker, me.

AS: In *Made for Denise*, there is a man quietly bleeding in front of the camera as he lights up a cigarette.

MA: This was an accidental shot. It's Peter Beard, who was in that video thing I was making with Larry Rivers in 1976; some video of a model that he had brought over for a collector, who he was making a painting for. So we put some lights on, somebody caught his foot in a cable, and the light fell on Peter's head and cut him. I was filming at the time and he said to keep filming, that it was fine, and then the blood started running. It stayed in my mind; I have this image of a man bleeding, and then suddenly it fell perfectly into this work, *Made for Denise*.

AS: How do you work with the images that you collect? How do you bring them together?

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MA: They have a great power in my head, those images, those sounds, and depending on the context, they carry on different meanings. They are my vocabulary, my words, my phrases, my great library. And if I choose to, I can use them later and forever in any of my video works; they are my new language. It is like a book and I look into it and I tear words out. This man bleeding, this character, his name, is not important. Who he is and how it happened is just fun gossip. In these kinds of works that I make, it is just the image of a wounded man. Is that what you are asking me?

AS: I was asking more specifically about the iconography. In art history, iconography and iconology deal with meanings of images, and historians try to put these images in certain categories; in more primitive iterations it is about finding out about what a painting should tell us. But there are more interesting ways of setting signs in motion and putting them to work. I am thinking about the way Aby Warburg constructed his Mnemosyne Atlas [1924-29], in which he brought together gestures that have the power of reappearing over many different periods and contexts, with slight modifications. There is something in the persistent reappearance of images in your films that makes me think about these kinds of uses of power of memory in order to find out about the sources of images, which is the Mnemosyne.

MA: But I work the opposite way. Warburg is making history, a story about what images are about, which is very interesting. But I do not go to see films in movie theaters because they could corrupt my thoughts and my practice of filmmaking; they are insidious, they teach me bad things. Maybe I do the same mistakes, but it is totally non-intellectualized, it is genetic.

AS: Oh, no, no. Of course I read a critique of a certain type of dry intellectualism in what you are saying now, but there is a difference between not being overly intellectual, and being intelligent or making intelligent use of the methods developed elsewhere. I think that you betray yourself at a certain point, for instance in the film in which you are tearing out pages of an art-history book. Basically you are doing two things there. One, you are bringing our attention to certain images and their importance to you; and two, you are doing it with these images and to them. There is this ambivalence between admiration and aggression, a way of showing that this is too beautiful for me, I have to destroy it, which is also a very beautiful act. In your films destruction is often positively connoted. There is a lot of tenderness, but there is also a lot of violence.

I thought about Warburg cutting pages with art-historical motives for his atlas of Mnemosyne, and his history of the evolution of gesture in art" gestures were what interested him, and they are also exactly what interest you. The gesture of a finger touching the wound for instance: one would find at least fifty such images in your films. And many less art-historically codified gestures that are specific to your body of work. Then you look at them closer and they reveal certain parents in the history of the image. I was thinking of decaying fruit, wild flowers. As the viewer you think: Why is this guy interested in all of this? Then you think: It is vanitas. In that same film you show a little skull that is trembling. You guide in wild ways your viewers through the iconographic landscapes of your films; you show them how to look at film by showing them the way you work. In that sense I appreciate what you say about the wholeness of poetic image on the one side, and the idea of making films as if using a certain image vocabulary to build phrases or entire poems on the other.

MA: Painting is very important to me. I have looked at painting since I was a kid; that is how I educated myself. I have a connection to still lives and the horror of imagery. Under the pretense and obligation of making religious painting, painters have expanded their subject matter critically, painting things that are sexy, horrific, and more horrific than the original subject matter.

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The Flemish, for example, are quite amazing at adding these painted comments. They're very important for me. I take a lot of inspiration from that but I do not think about it.

AS: You seem to be fairly immune to the imagery of cartoons. The sixties and seventies were a lot about popular imagery. Yet you seem to have these very classic references.

MA: I grew up without television. I used to hang around the Louvre when I was sixteen, seventeen, eighteen. I just went in and checked out the paintings for hours at a time. I was fascinated by their wealth of information about food, weaponry, clothing, jewelry, landscape, war, sex, murder, greed, beauty. These are the only visual clues of those times.

AS: And writing? You said your starting point was poetry.

MA: And photography. It is hard to talk about how my life was. You know people talk about their past and how they were raised in a very authoritative way it is weird every time I hear myself talking about my past. It's never the same as the last time I described it. So I will give you this version: When I arrived in Paris I was seventeen. I had not much, my parents kind of disappeared on me, and I fell into Le Chat Qui che, a famous free jazz bar. There was this guy running the bar, who was a poet, Patrice Cauda. He became a very good friend. He had tons of books and through him I met Ren Char and Marcel Jouhandeau in reality, as well as Rimbaud, Verlaine, Shakespeare, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Artaud, Proust, Camus, Robbe-Grillet, and others through their writings. Some of these characters were very influential on me. I tried to emulate Rimbaud I mean, the behavior. I read a lot about their personal lives and I thought it was great although they suffered a lot. And I became more rebellious, more political, because of these poetic encounters.

AS: Were you aware of the Situationists in Paris?

MA: No. In 1967 I was asked to show my 16mm films Krylon and Lune X in a Lettrist hangout, a bar in Paris, and they actually looked at them. It was the first time I felt an interest in my work. It took me a long time to figure out that Maurice Lematre was Maurice Lematre. Their behavior was so strange to me. They were cool, but it was hard for me to get into their world. They were totally interested in my films. But I did not get them exactly.

AS: Did you see Guy Debord's films? La soci du spectacle [1973]?

MA: Yes, but much later, in New York. I saw it fully by 1978, when I started to get bootlegged stuff and things on VHS.

AS: So you had this moment when you got exposed to a lot of good writing, poetry and prose, not only French but also translations. And then you moved to the US.

MA: I first went to America in 1962 by myself. I took a container ship from Hamburg and went to New York. I was a part-time assistant to a fashion photographer for Harper's Bazaar in Paris, and I was really good at helping and loading films, so he would call me during the collections and say, Why don't you come to New York. So one day I just took a boat and went there. I arrived in New Jersey, and I thought it was New York. I stayed for a year until I had to leave for overstaying my visa. When I got back to France I had been drafted; the French authorities were looking for me to go to the military because I was nineteen. My father, when he was around, talked about

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Russia; he thought it was the best country. For some reason I took America. Then, later, in 1969 in Paris, one late night I met Viva in the street with Nico. I had raised some money to make my film *Keeping Busy*. And I said to Viva: I want you to star in my film. I went with her to Rome, shot the film, we became lovers. And then Agns Varda called Viva and asked her to star in her film *Lions Love* [1969] in Hollywood. Viva said: I am not going without my boyfriend. So Agns had to pay for my trip to LA in order for Viva to come to her. And then, after the movie was done, we went to New York and stayed at the Chelsea Hotel for the next four years.

AS: You made *Roman Variations* in 91, and it seems Rome was an important place for you, one of those cities you like to return to. Your journeys, they often lead to the south.

MA: I think that I choose these places because I judge them to be less changed by the Western world. Morocco in the seventies was still very traditional. In Afghanistan it was like that, before it was destroyed. You step back a hundred years or more. Bolivia is eighty-percent indigenous people; they live the way they did a thousand years ago. And they chew coca leaves. It is a nice kind of drug, not like cocaine. It keeps you up a bit and not hungry, and it is good for traveling in the High Andes mountains, by yourself. You know, I am always by myself when I travel to these kinds of places.

AS: What about Vanuatu?

MA: The same thing. Vanuatu was returned to its indigenous people after it was plundered by the French and the English at the beginning of the nineteenth century until the 1960s. There is not much to be exploited there except the coconut trees planted during the past colonial era. No one uses much of that oil commodity anymore, so the country was kind of returned back to the islanders. Most of these islands are very isolated. Of course, a lot of Westerners have been there, but you can step into places where there still is a vision of things that brings you far back. And that beauty is interesting to me, as is being able to make a video recording of my experiences. It is also the physical part of being there: no restaurants, no hotels.

AS: Rome and New York are explainable within this logic: they are capitals of empires. So you are also interested in the opposite side of this pastoral state, which is the decaying empire, which makes me think of Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire* [1833-36], five paintings that show the empire's savage and pastoral states before the catastrophe and then the ancient world falling apart from earthquake, deluge, fire, and all kinds of apocalyptic scenarios. But it is not the wrath of God; it is humanity meeting its end, quite inevitably, because of its many faults. Similarly, there is a certain moral statement in your work that I think has to do with this confrontation between the dark side and some other side, which is not the light side, but maybe the life side, which also includes death. I was just thinking how it was for you to work quite consequently for so many years in New York, which is not an easy place to survive, particularly in the seventies and eighties.

MA: I should title my 45 years of video *The Course of Empire*. Even now, not much has changed for me since the seventies, though the city has become more modern. New York's my headquarters, my address where my bills are sent, where my studios have been for the past 43 years. At some point in my four-hour film *Vanuatu Chronicles* [1998], I said that even though I am here on that pristine spot, on the island of Ambrym, I have to live in the falling empire. Even if I go to the countryside in upstate New York, I cannot live there all the time. I need a place where

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all my videotapes are and everything can happen really fast. If you want something, some information, some object, it is there, much faster than in Europe. I am used to having my headquarters in New York, to making films, and to depositing what I have taken. It is just a place that works well for me.

AS: I understand the practicalities and the habit of living there, but still, as a scenery, as a subject matter for the films

MA: I have exhausted New York in my films. I did a new work about the city recently, called Untitled (I Was Looking Back To See If You Were Looking Back At Me To See Me Looking Back At You) [2012]. I filmed for a year from my windows, filming the buildings, the streets, all the different actions going on in NYC. Well, I have not exhausted New York, apparently.

AS: In your films, you see it very much as a closed city; there are a lot of walls and cells. You film people in small interiors. There are not many open vistas. Sometimes there is sky but the sky is empty.

MA: I have filmed all the facets in this city. The open vistas of New York are a whole new work that I am putting together, a full installation, in fact. The people are my actors and the cities are my sets. People I know suddenly do something interesting, or I am in a certain situation and I feel I can record some of that. Wherever I am I can figure that out, but it turns out it happens in New York too.

AS: But there are many more people you do not know at all, and whom you probably never will get to know. These are the people you film from a distance, looking into their rooms, looking at their behavior in a way that often reminds me of the naturalist's point of view, as somebody who is curious of a species. You look at people as if you are looking at animals. There is John Berger's book *Why Look at Animals?* [1980/2009], and it describes how we can learn from animal behavior the behavior of people. But you seem more interested in reading animals in people, not in the expression of their individuality, but more as a divided herd. I am thinking about these passages in the *Chronicles Morocco* [1971-72], where donkeys are scattered

MA: In a parking lot.

AS: Having sex, jumping around.

MA: They are waiting for their bosses, their owners.

AS: Doing whatever. And people are doing very similar things in your films. I think one of the large arches in your work is the leveling of the animal world and the human world, and maybe even the object world. There is a drive behind the eye that looks at all these different phenomena as somehow very much of the same kin.

MA: Yes, I have often said that during the making of Cindy Sherman [1988], the method I used is the one for filming wild animals; you set up your camera near the spot where they go to drink from the river everyday. In the case of Cindy, the river is her studio where she goes drinking.

AS: You seem to be very interested in non-events.

MA: Dead time, you mean? But it is not really dead to me; there is a lot going on. I think even

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some writers, Alain Robbe-Grillet, for example, go into describing almost nothing. I feel that there is something there that is important. To be engaged in that time when there is almost nothing.

AS: People just hanging out, looking at things, passing by, scratching, things like that. It brings you to the animal kingdom. The difference would be that animals do not get bored, while humans get bored easily. You bring animal qualities to humans. It always strikes me that you do not seem to portray people who are too stressed out about something; instead, they have an almost royal laziness or carelessness about time passing.

MA: It is against my morals to use people under stress, but there is plenty of stress described in many of my films.

AS: You also do portray people who are obsessively busy with something, or running somewhere after something: fame, for instance, or drugs. Sometimes there are very strong and intense characters and you can go crazy when you listen to them. Nevertheless, in your films I often sense sympathy for your human subjects.

MA: I do not like to exploit people. I think I have not done that up to now, unless our politician's morals are changing again, which they are. You are not supposed to look at people; there are all kinds of laws about that now. When I am editing I make sure that if I have recorded someone that doesn't know that they have been recorded, that I do not feature them in a situation that would be upsetting for them, or a situation in which they would be recognized. They are just people; you cannot really tell who that is on the windowsill.

AS: The excessive care about people's rights to privacy and to their image is a part of biopolitics today, in which the state defines relationships between people. What we are witnessing, in the US even more than in Europe, is a form of virtual imprisonment of human beings who are theoretically walking free. The unregulated space of human relations shrunk drastically and was superseded by the current corporate fiction of the Totally Safe Western-European and US-American World. And this is something that your films speak very passionately against, and they do it right from the start, with a prophetic intuition, if one remembers that the footage we are talking about might be coming from the year 1970.

MA: My entire attitude not consciously is about disregarding the authorities, to a certain extent. There is always some limit to all this stuff. The forces are very powerful and they can stop you. Still, I can work within the parameters and turn around all those things that people are trying to impose on me. That is the power of film. That is what some comedians do on stage: they manage to be very aggressive within the parameters. For instance the film *The Aristocrats* [2005] proved that point. That is the beauty of language.

AS: What do you teach your students?

MA: To open their eyes, which means to make their eyes notice more than education usually is inclined to do, namely collecting and assembling facts as Josef Albers has said, which is like how I make films. I do not show mainstream films they can see those whenever they want to. I carefully orchestrated my own film history and what can be done with sound and image. I am lucky to have a film collection that has been built up over the past 15 years. I then carefully rearranged and remixed segments, like a DJ, so they can be dealt with in a three-hour class at

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Yale University's School of Art. I often show artists talking about themselves. For instance, last semester I showed Damien Hirst, among many others. On his website there is a film that he made about himself. Not that I like it, but it is an interesting example of using a film for self-promotion. It is very boringly well made.

AS: You know the film where John Chamberlain is cutting his sofa? It is called *The Hersey Couch* [1976].

MA: He made one for me and *Viva in the Chelsea Hotel*, with his big knife. I have great footage of him in the countryside. There is a film of him cutting it?

AS: In an apartment in a hotel or residential building in front of Central Park, an apartment of a rich person, like a collector. There are tons of people around. Some guests appear and snort coke as he is cutting and drinking; it takes ages, and nothing happens. It is great. But back to the students. I wanted to address this one question: One popular saying today is that we live in a world that is saturated with images and that there is an overflow. But when one looks at your work one comes to the conclusion that you totally enjoy the fact that the world is saturated with images. You are just working through them.

MA: More words that come into my grasp.

AS: It is amazing to see how you manage the images. I understood it when I looked at *Endless Column* [2011], where you are typing images. You hear clac, clac, clac, and the images go very fast, but you, the viewer, do not get tired. Instead you get hyper-excited to the point when it is almost more than you can take. It keeps you on a highly responsive level towards the images. It is a practical demonstration of the fact that we are perfectly capable of handling a lot of images, thinking logically between them, and then when there is no logic in between, to fill it up with associations. Psychology jumps in and makes connections. There has been a lot of image critique. Cindy Sherman, for instance, and the artists of the Pictures Generation decided to look into how we construct images. They created strong and immobile images. It reminds me a little bit of going to the Museum of Natural History, where you have stuffed animals.

MA: Solidified things.

AS: Well, and the way you work with images is like working with living animals. In your films the images are like living currency, not like dead signs. I am not surprised that you seem to be quite excited by the iPhone and that kind of direct extension of the hand, rather than maybe only of the eye. Maybe it is one of the first devices where you are not supposed to look into some kind of viewer, but you just point at something. It is the gesture of the hand that captures and determines what will appear on the screen for the viewer.

MA: I hate to say iPhone, but I think the phone is a great tool. Because everyone has one there are a lot of thoughts about it. I do not have to think about it, though, because that is what I do: I use the smallest tools available to record. For the first two years I had a phone I did not realize that I was making work with it. *Endless Column* is made with a phone, *Narcolepsy* is too, and there are more coming up.

AS: As we've already discussed, a couple of your works introduce literary genres: chronicles, diaries, confessions. We also have a conversation, a portrait

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MA: And then there are titles with references to film. A Coupla White Faggots Sitting Around Talking [1980], Seduction of Patrick [1979], Chasing the Dragon [1987], The Feature [2008]. They are all put together soap-opera-style.

AS: Soap opera in the costume of religious drama. Seduction of Patrick sounds almost like the martyrdom of Jeanne d'Arc. It has a high religious tone that gets perverted over the course of the film. A Coupla White Faggots Sitting Around Talking indeed sounds like a comment on soap, but also rings of Debords film On the Passage of a Few Persons Through a Rather Brief Unity of Time [Sur le passage de quelques personnes Å travers une assez courte unit de temps, 1959], and one of its opening lines: ur camera has captured for you a few glimpses of an ephemeral micro-society. Apocalypse Later [2003] that is a clear biblical and cinematic reference. And then there is The Feature. The title sounds like the most generic thing imaginable...

MA: I was thinking of making something out of all my footage. A new work, going into everything. The filmmaker Andrew Neel, who is the grandson of my friend Alice Neel, has a production company and we talked for a few years about making a film. Finally, in 2006, we started The Feature. We worked with Luke Meyer, a great editor. I usually edit myself but we figured that if I started editing this film, I would have become distracted by my own footage and not follow the idea we had planned. We spent two years making it.

AS: So it is special in some way.

MA: Yes, in the sense that it is not the way I usually work.

AS: You do not often collaborate. You do most of the editing yourself. Actually, the piecing together is a key part of your work.

MA: Sound, editing, and filming are all equal. It is important in my work to personally control them. But for The Feature, it was important for someone else to collaborate on it and edit it with me.

AS: What does the title mean? Does it relate to the length?

MA: Yes, this is a feature film: it is three hours. The first thing I said at the Berlin Film Festival was: I think the title is wrong, it should have been called The Trailer. Comparatively, the length of the film that we made from the existing footage is about a trailer-ratio.

AS: One could say Cleopatra was also a feature film. What would be the difference in approach?

MA: Cleopatra is wilder; I filmed most of it myself. Also I had a crew. The Feature uses my archives as source material and new, hyper-cinematic scenes, shot by my co-director Neel. I perform in it some kind of an artist that has access to all kinds of things, a composite person on top of the food chain in the art world. It is not based on one artist in particular. When artists make millions selling their work they often become strange; it is a complex thing that is happening. Newly rich, they act like Hollywood superstars, and suddenly they just recoil into walls. That is what money does, or power. You cannot really hang around in the street anymore. I play that kind of character in the film; it's kind of a comedy. Then a few months later Andrew Neel came back asking me to tell my life story, and he recorded it with a tape recorder. I made up some stuff, and some things are real. All along the film you hear that voiceover. Sometimes I say I sometimes I say he it is not to hide anything: My life is on film everywhere; my behavior is

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totally exposed. It was more about the confusing power of film. The viewers then think it is a real story, and often I have been asked if I am going to die, because at the beginning of the film I am supposed to have a brain tumor. Because we tried to make it like a film, there is a beginning and there is an end. That is why we got invited to film festivals they could relate to it.

AS: Because it has this narrative pretext, and that should be enough to qualify.

MA: Yes. And suddenly they became excited. Inside all of that you can see a lot of extracts of my works. There are a few articles about it, by serious people, which are pretty interesting.

AS: You know this documentary on Chet Baker [Bruce Webers Lets Get Lost, 1988]?

MA: I have never seen it. I knew Chet. I thought it was a film.

AS: He is not very well in it. He died soon thereafter. He is being driven in a car, in Cannes and LA and other places that he had visited before. They brought him to Cannes; he is hanging out with girls. I was wondering how you managed, over so many years, to avoid over-stylization. For instance, this Baker film is all about contrast, very black-and-white, like early nouvelle vague or Cassavetes.

MA: That is why I did not look at it, because it looked like film noir, it kind of scares me. Cassavetes is awesome.

AS: It is pretty beautiful and very sad. You seem to rather work with what a medium offers. The quality of the image is the result of a given medium that you use, but without any extra tricks.

MA: I use it in the simplest way possible.

AS: Differences come from the fact that you use different formats: several types of video, different characteristics of digital material, creating an aesthetic out of dissonances, instead of one unifying tenor.

MA: If you look at Antonioni or Bergman, they always use the same cameraman. They really have a vision: they play with the light. I like to look at that. I think I have a style; you can recognize it. The aesthetic comes from the way I handle the camera. I know exactly what it does when I use it, and I do not make too many mistakes. Actually, I can make beautiful light in the work, because I know how to adapt with the tool. There is a lot of thinking about how things have to be done.

AS: But mostly using a natural setting.

MA: Mostly using existing light and trying sometimes to put the object into bare light.

AS: Still it is working with the circumstances and not creating a show with studio lights, a setting. Which could be also done with simple means.

MA: My whole idea is to have as little as possible to make films. A Coupla White Faggots it was so difficult to make that film because no one had any money including the downtown actors. I did bring some lights but then the film kind of degenerated by being copied on some lower equipment. And it's fine anyway; no regrets.

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AS: Did you sometimes re-shoot?

MA: I cannot remember re-shooting anything, ever. If it does not work I just move on and replace it with something else.

AS: How is your image bank organized? How do you find things there?

MA: My image bank is constantly sharply floating in my head. The styles you see in my work are different because they are different formats; the tapes look physically different. So already, visually, on my shelves, I can go straight to the seventies because they look so different. But most of the tapes have been digitized. So now with titles and numbers you just go back and forth, and you can scratch through a lot of stuff very fast. I also have a list with descriptions of 1700 tapes, organized by key words. The other part is the software it is kind of a miracle. The work still has to be done, still has to be good. But it is a help; it permits me to travel through all the things that I am looking for and to hear sounds that I never heard before because they are in a corner of the tape. It is a fantastic improvement.

AS: You have soundtracks separate?

MA: Sometimes I forget that I have them. I have tons of them.

AS: Do you use physical tapes anymore?

MA: I cannot even play the tapes. I only look at digital. I have 300 videotapes that are not digitized, and that are becoming a bit of a problem.

AS: What do you do with those?

MA: They are there on a shelf. If I could find some funds, they could be digitized.

AS: What kind of material?

MA: Half-inch reel-to-reel. There are not any players anymore. And they stick to the drums. They have to be put in some kind of a bath. I am sure there are a few good things that could be done. It is from the early seventies.

AS: But it is material, not works.

MA: There is material and definitely there are works that is why I kept all my tapes, because they are works in general. At the beginning, I wrote notes on every tape. I have tons of notebooks with the written content of the tapes: Bridget is there, blah, blah, blah, Andy is there, and then we are in the Hamptons, another good shot of breast pump

AS: Did other people use your material for their work?

MA: People often ask me. I am not a good lender of my work. I have done it a few times for friends. People want to make their own film with pieces of my films, they want to see Gregory Corso, Warhol, Sherman, some cliché or whatever. But everybody wants everything for free and I really cannot afford it. I want good money for my footage. Fuck it. If they do not want to pay for it I am not giving it. I spent my entire life making films and I do not even have a net below me.

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But it is fine, I am an expert at this. I have a home in the countryside, a car, my studio in Williamsburg. I live well. Look, I am talking to you at the Les Trois Rois in Basel tonight.

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