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MICHEL AUDER

the thoroughly documented, marginally fictional life of Michel Auder, artist

text by ANDREW BERARDINI
portraits by ANNABEL MEHRAN

Michel Auder is not the first person to edit his life for the sake of art, but his is surely one of the grandest of such projects. Minute-by-minute, hour-by-hour, the truth is that reality can be boring. Even during sleep, a cavalcade of mostly mundane thoughts shove and prattle for space, filling the silence, occupying the gaps in consciousness. Our prayers and worries, petty envies and quiet castigations, the tongue-bitten complaints and heart-crumpling concerns, hopes, loves, obsessions, and lusts all scrape against each other in the long hours. Yes, you have regrets. The word "regret" floats through you like an autumn leaf, back-and-forth in gentle arcs, down and away. But one thing leads to another. Real time is unsettling from the outside looking in.

Can you play it all back? On the screen of your blinkered eyelids, all the mornings, evenings, afternoons, all the quotidian and extraordinary triumphs and transgressions that occur in a single life? Can you reorder these events in your head, isolating one kind or another? Does it all come through like some distant transmission from a planet you traveled to long ago and to which you never wish to return? Or is it like you are living it all now? The memories more real than the present moment, so transporting that you can smell the invisible lilacs of decades past, more floral and pungent than real flowers could ever be.

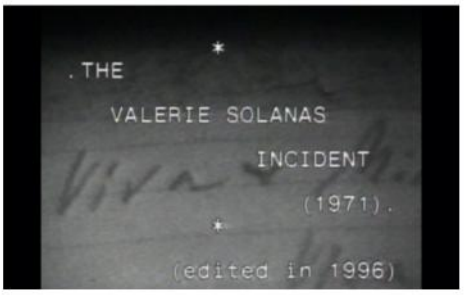
Life, and this may be stating the obvious, isn't what actually happened but how we remember it happening, the subtle edits we make from moment to moment. People have always retold their slanted tales, and history is proverbially written by its winners. But what about our own anonymous stories?

In the most literal sense, Michel Auder is as much a historian

as an artist. He is his own recording angel, both seeing himself and seeing from himself, the camera almost always handy, over four decades of creative activity. The shots he records are of himself, his lovers, his bad behavior as well as his moments of grace. There is an intense and gruesome beauty captured in his casual affairs and long stares through open windows. There are images of drugs, sex, varieties of self-abuse, arguments, portraits of working artists, performers and occasional porn stars, yet more sex, vacations, torsos, cigarettes, boredom and sunsets. There is the stream of life, the fiction of the everyday extended, shot with intimacy, languor, and emotionally exposed. The material can be degrading, with the nostalgic atmosphere of a home movie, but edited, always edited.

The truth is that each of our lives is filled with a collection of moments that, when strung together carefully, is capable of revealing the profound depth and power of all existence: tragedy and farce, rhythm and joy, terror and bravery. Few of us, however, have – for art or ego – revealed our lives so nakedly as Auder. Or so oddly and compellingly.

Auder's career took a fortuitous turn when he purchased his first portable video camera (a Sony Portapak, the first portable video camera). With that, he let the film roll incessantly on what seems an extraordinary life, and by many measures it is. The litany of Auder's allies and collaborators, subjects and lovers, shows him to be a kind of nexus of the social and artistic change happening all around him. He recorded everything from the May '68 riots in Paris to Andy Warhol's Factory in downtown New York City; from his drug misadventures with Eric Bogosian to his amorous relationships with the actress Viva, and the artist Cindy Sherman. There are also personal portraits of his friends, including Alice Neel and Annie Sprinkle.



These boldface names and collaborators are an essential component of his work. Yet in addition to capturing his glamorous milieu, Auder accumulated over 5,000 hours of raw footage taken from his private life, his interests and observations. What's most important artistically is his ability to reassemble and interpret all this footage. The friends and lovers, the situations and historical moments are merely conditions and contexts for imagination. Auder transforms himself from documentarian to artist only when he shuffles the material around, concentrating equally on what is being seen and the eye that is seeing it.

Lines blur. Since his life experiences are the material of his work, it becomes difficult to separate the two. One is left with the sense that he may even find it difficult to do that. In the trailer for The Feature (2008), the film of his life that he made with Andrew Neel, Auder appears framed by flowers, a bunch of bananas lying on the table in front of him, and waxes philosophic about his work:

"If you take five thousand or so video hours and deduct what my life has been, it could be made in so many different ways and in so many different takes. I could come out like a total asshole, like a monster, like a great poet. My life is based on my video works. I was attracted to making movies out of what was already around me. The idea of making film constantly out of whatever was around me. I don't need actors, I don't need sets. I'll take the sets and the actors from what's around me."

Piece by piece, with a view through a chink in the edited hours, to look at Auder's work is to look at his life, thoroughly documented and marginally fictionalized. But how does one arrange all these events: by their chronology or by the chronology of his edits?

Chelsea Girls with Andy Warhol, 1971-76, an 88-minute video, may have been shot in the '70s, but Auder left it unedited until 1994. Here he observes and learns from Warhol the simple genius/stupidity of letting a camera run unattended for hours: "Q: So all pictures are good that come from a camera? Warhol: Yes." Somehow, the mundane becomes heroic with repetition and time, and the simple act of capturing one's era without fuss takes on its own weird charm. Warhol, who was the center of the social machine that burnished Auder's reputation — and from whose talent the latter was constantly drawing — comes across in Chelsea Girls as a kind of empty vessel. After the film was shot, his reputation waxed and waned while the footage sat stuffed on a shelf or in a box somewhere for 20 years. Auder found other projects.

There was Chasing the Dragon (an old Chinese metaphor for opium use), the 43-minute video he made with Eric Bogosian, which more or less follows Bogosian as he bumbles around getting high, his sense of story bleeding between the fictive and the real. The film was made between 1971 and 1987, and one can easily imagine Auder over that sixteen-year span simply not being done, getting distracted by something else, constantly tweaking his footage, finally letting it go into the world and perhaps even then not letting it be over.

The focus of Auder's work isn't always on his immediate life, but on the strange things he sees. In 1984, for example, he recorded a number of Olympic events, when the games were in Los Angeles, directly from the television screen. Like a good swathe of his work, even the Olympics become salacious. Of course, the games are always about bodies, but Auder makes a special effort in this 25-minute video to concentrate on athletes' crotches, the folds and bulges tightly wrapped in synthetics and cotton, spread-eagled and arched in fantastic configurations. You also glance at their parts, briefly, tastefully, trying not to appear too concupiscent or sleazy. This work is a second level of mediation. Maybe Auder is critiquing TV's reduction of humans to

mere bodies; maybe he's just turned on. Perhaps it is both. The apparent lust, coupled with the irony of the Olympics as a couch sport for the viewer, locates the work inside Auder and his particular desires.

In both Voyage to the Center of the Phone Lines (1993) and his more recent work Untitled (I was looking back to see if you were looking back at me to see me looking back at you) (2012), Auder finds himself peering into other people's lives without their permission. In the first case he taps cell phone conversations. In the second, he is peeping from his window into other peoples' apartments. The intimacy of the phone conversations captured in Voyage can be bracing. It would be off-puttingly intimate if it didn't bring out the voyeur in me. I find myself feeling guilty, even as a procession of sunsets and nature shots complements these often furtive conversations. A part of me does wonder if these are real exchanges. They must be. But then again, does it even matter? Do we depend on the film's documentary fact for the project to fully work?

In the latter video, Auder is shooting circumstances it would be difficult to fake, and often he's implicated in our watching him watching them: his reflection in the window glass (as well as what appears to be his granddaughter), the sounds of TVs maundering in the background. The acts we witness together are both sexy and mundane. Why is it always lonelier to watch people eating by themselves, especially when they are watching television? Why are we so curious about how others move, fight, fuck when we're sure that they think no one is watching? Auder seems to be breaking some social codes in regard to privacy. Are we also implicated? Or are we cleared because, at least in the case of his own life, we have been invited to watch?

In Auder's short video My Last Bag of Heroin (For Real) (1986), which is perhaps one of his best, you know he's full of shit. You hope he's not for his own sake, but this film depicts Auder at his lowest, a junkie desperate to stop. Auder the actor reveals himself to be an untrustworthy narrator. The general rule of "Don't trust junkies" is of course always in effect, but here it can also been seen as a commentary on his entire oeuvre, a moment of revelation: everything should be regarded as art – not documentary – with the demands of concept and aesthetic overriding fact. It's just that here the fiction he's constructing is drawn from an archive that once, on some level, reflected reality.

Like much of Auder's work, the archive is so big that the artist's work of documenting and re-editing will only be finished when he is, too. Five thousand hours, if he's telling the truth, is over two hundred solid days of footage, the value of which is found less in the sheer length of the project than in the additional time Auder has invested in rearranging it. It is Auder the human artist who animates his work through subjective choices.

While watching Auder's oeuvre, I find myself wishing that I had a recording of every sunset I paused to watch, every lover's face dissolving into orgasm, every mistake, every noble deed, every act of cowardice and flight of poetic monologue. I wish I could see it indexed and reordered, a series of unfortunate events and a building of glories, each a different edit of the same small existence. A life seen only through passenger windows, the acres of book pages, the years of screens. To reorder it, to make it make sense, to document, not to cement fact, but to enliven imagination — to return back to wherever that was. A madeleine, perhaps.

I don't know if I could handle my own collective cruelty, the careful documentation of myself at my weakest, most fearful, the abyssal plunges. Would I be brave enough as an artist to expose what a selfish prick I've been in life? Or would I choose to expose only the moments of self-aggrandizement, of profound generosity and hard-fought bravery? Setting aside the day-to-day rhythm, the form of fact, would I be brave enough to reveal the truth? In this light, I feel lucky to have Auder.

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