

INTERVIEW

## Michel Auder

"Well, I observe humankind. I observe man and woman in struggle. And that's why I feel like an anthropologist."

JULY 1, 1994



All images: Stills from Michel Auder's *Chronicles: Magnetic Notes*, color video, 1986–87. Total running time: 42 minutes.

Having shot thousands of hours of videotape over the past 24 years—during which time he was virtually never without his portable video equipment—Michel Auder has compiled a nearly comprehensive diary, a library of his life from which to extract his art. The protagonists of his tapes are some of the most conspicuous and illustrious personages of the New York downtown art/theater scene, making the collected body of work a time capsule of alternative styles. Auder's presence as the creator of the diaries is subtly felt through the manipulated television segments, his characteristically poetic style of editing, and in the audio track, a mixture of live sound and music taped from the radio. Preferring the stance of a voyeur to that of a sage, Auder creates his own intimacy through his choice of experts. These become the "words" that make up his "sentences;" this "vocabulary" is reused over and over, each time creating a new chapter to his ongoing diary.

# MARTOS GALLERY

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**Carole Ann Klonarides**

When you moved from film to video you began to adapt a more, for lack of a better word, “documentary diaristic” style. Was that through Warhol? Or how do you see that occurring?

**Michel Auder**

When I moved to New York, Warhol had already become a big influence for me. And then I got to be right in the middle of it, around all those people—Viva and the Factory group . . . that’s when I started documenting everyone I knew.

**CAK**

What year was this, about?

**MA**

1969, ’70, ’71, and on.

**CAK**

That was a time when the media was starting to influence alternative film—the idea of *The Celebrity*, *Cinema Vérité*.

**MA**

The Warhol group came to my home. But then other people came to my home too. My life became documented in relation to what I saw or what I didn’t see. I would catch just a little bit of the moment. Of course you miss most of it. It was not in any way a documentary, not to be related as truth. The work reflects my own feelings. I only expose what I want and of course in the process I also expose what I don’t want. Because the sum of everything is showing my character and my taste.

**CAK**

Is that why you feel it’s more like writing than documenting?

**MA**

Yeah. That’s where writing comes in.

**CAK**

You told me that for many years you carried around a camera, and you had it with you so often that people forgot your presence and your taping.

# MARTOS GALLERY

**MA**

I have a camera out with me all the time. When people came to my home they knew they were stepping into my studio—they'd know I would be shooting them.

**CAK**

Do you see this process as a seamless continuum?

**MA**

I call some of my tapes variations, like a piece of music, a variation of themes. And sometimes the variation is my vision of my world and sometimes it's of the world in general: what's on television, nature, and sometimes it's people close and of interest to me. Those are the three main things I deal with all day long.

**CAK**

By "what's on television" do you mean you shoot images off the TV?

**MA**

Right. By shooting off television I can record what is emphasized by the media at a certain time, what people want you to know. I receive and I shoot it, transforming it in my own way. I'm obsessed by all the violence. I record it and use it in my work.

**CAK**

The media invades a person's personal environment. The radio, the stereo, the television—they are in your home and a part of your life. What I noticed in your work is that you connect certain information shot off television to nature, and to the family, and the personal.

**MA**

I like to shoot TV images when I travel. When I go to a hotel I put on the television, especially in other countries. During the war in Iraq, for three weeks I only worked with TV I reshot it, took close-ups of things. I have 10 hours.

**CAK**

Why do that rather than taping it with a VCR?

**MA**

I believe that when I shoot something I give it another life. All my work goes through my camera.

**CAK**

Like Warhol, you're silent. We don't hear or see you in your tapes. How do you think you are identified through your work?

# MARTOS GALLERY

**MA**

I like to be identified as a voyeur.

**CAK**

You had an interesting mix of people on the tapes. They were poets, writers, actors. Kind of the downtown New York scene. But of a certain kind of that scene.

**MA**

Yeah, the hardcore people.

**CAK**

Now what do you mean by hardcore?

*(BREAK INTAPE)*

**MA**

I stopped going to school when I was 17. And my father was gone. My reputation is from the streets. I'd go to bars and stuff . . . I don't know how to explain. There was a famous bar in St. Germain des Prés where all the best American jazz players would come and play. They jammed at this place called the Chat qui Peche. The owner, who was always drunk, and a poet, took a liking to me. He tried to fuck me a few times, it didn't work out, and then he became my best friend. And he helped me out. He was a father figure to me. If you have Rimbaud as your idol then you see the kind of life he's living. You know, Rimbaud was a great artist and a great poet, but he was really fucked up. So I got accepted for being like this myself.

**CAK**

Do you consider that being a Romantic?

**MA**

I did. The artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were my idea of how an artist should be. So I copied that a little bit. And then it caught up with me. By that time when I was a teenager, everybody was using drugs like zombies, shooting up heroin. I wasn't touching one fucking drug until I hit 22, you know. When I came to America I was 25. At that time I was smoking hashish . . . and opium. I loved opium, I thought it was really great. In those years everybody was lying down on the floor and puffing on pipes made of bamboo, smoking liquid opium wherever they got it, like wine. And we just did that all day long . . . dreaming . . .

**CAK**

But sometimes you'd pick up the camera and you'd shoot.

# MARTOS GALLERY

**MA**

Right. Shooting was my identity. That was my work. I was, and I am, absolutely convinced that that was and is my job.

**CAK**

Over a 20 year period you've taped some of the same characters. For example, your daughter is on tape from her birth to college. How does that affect your work—recording something as personal as your own blood, kin? You're seeing her grow and change through the lens of the camera. How has this affected her?

**MA**

I think it has blurred her memory. And she might resent it sometimes. She has said to me a few times that it's difficult to see all that past stuff. She believes that's her life. And let's face it, whatever I have on videotape of her life is about two thousand hours. Two thousand hours in 21 years is absolutely nothing, time-wise. You know what I mean? It's only a little drop in the bucket and that's not reality. Nothing is real if it's from the camera. Context and editing change everything. I see it as a pointing light inevitably fixed to the time the event was shot. I try not to deal with the material as soon as it's made. It's only years later that I deal with the material. I store it up. I wait until I can look at it and say, "What was I doing?"

**CAK**

Have any of your subjects resented your control? Or the use of them in your work?

**MA**

Not really. With my daughter, I'm releasing material slowly because as time goes by, and she's much older, it's better. She's on tape masturbating when she was three years old —I figure she can deal with it now. It hasn't come to the point where I'm asking her permission. My daughter and I are having an interesting new chapter in our life. She's just written a book, a novel, about me and Viva, her mother.

**CAK**

Oh! She's turned the tables.

**MA**

Right. I don't look too good in it.

**CAK**

No? You've read it.

# MARTOS GALLERY

**MA**

Yeah. She gave it to me. She said “Dad, you’re the first person to read it.” It’s written as a fictional novel, but some of it is true!

**CAK**

Do you see your work as psychological at all? Is it analyzing anything or is it: If it happens, it happens?

**MA**

I am more like an anthropologist.

**CAK**

What do you mean by that?

**MA**

Well, I observe humankind. I observe man and woman in struggle. And that’s why I feel like an anthropologist. So that’s the first part of my body of work, up to the taping of my daughter. My daughter is seen in the context of being “a child,” not specifically mine. I hope I reveal how kids behave when no one is looking at them. Because I can almost make myself disappear into the woodwork when the camera begins—

**CAK**

And there was no direction.

**MA**

I’m totally co-operating with her as the voyeur. I don’t tell them what to do. I’m watching them and catching them. Like wild animals. And the same thing with the grownups. I don’t try to classify them as part of a story . . . they tell me the story, they talk to each other and look at the camera and say, “Oh that camera, is it on, or not?” Later in the editing room I manipulate the footage toward what I want to say . . .

**CAK**

But some of your images are very beautiful and very aestheticized. I feel that there is an incredible intuitiveness about what you’re capturing of people, but there’s also something very deliberate about what you’re capturing with nature and the non-peopled scenes. When you’re shooting nature you’re taking more liberties with the way you shoot, and with people, you let them speak and in the post-production take creative license. And then you have interviews with artists where you interviewed a creative individual over a period of many years.

# MARTOS GALLERY

**MA**

These artists are my friends. They have to be my friends. I wouldn't really call them interviews. Alice Neel is talking to me for real. I capture her over a period of six, seven years. I used to go and have breakfast with her at least once a week. I took the subway with my camera up to 107th Street and I would spend the whole day, she would make lunch, and she'd be painting. I just hung around and we'd talk about everything. She'd bring me back to reality. She always recharged my batteries, no matter how bad I felt, especially in those years when nothing was happening. I knew she was a great artist. And she would say the same thing about me. It put me in my place when I was complaining and whining. So, therefore, friendship is a necessity in the work. I did one with Larry Rivers but I haven't put it out yet, it's not finished. But Larry, I was living with him for four years. And Cindy Sherman, my wife, of course. I'm just looking at her work and shooting things in her studio. But it's already become a kind of document.

**CAK**

You're very involved and attracted to individuals who are creative in a very specific way. They are very extroverted in their work and yet they're kind of social misfits.

**MA**

I need them. I need someone whom I admire, and think is really interesting and I need to be close to them.



# MARTOS GALLERY

**CAK**

But doesn't that put you in a position of people not seeing who you are and what you contribute, but as one who uses these people, a sycophant—

**MA**

I don't worry about that.

**CAK**

You don't?

**MA**

Why should I, these are the people I'm close to.

**CAK**

So your identity is mingled in with these people, as your friends, as your subjects, but you also feel that something else emerges?

**MA**

Completely. I have my own life. I need somebody I think is greater than me to be able to learn from them.

*(BREAK INTAPE)*

**CAK**

Do you feel using video is being elusive?

**MA**

I'm seeing something else in what other people see. I create a description of certain feelings that are not often brought up, what's really going on in the world, what's always in the back of our heads. What else is there to talk about but life? I don't know what other subjects there are—I'm not an abstract person. I'm a reality person. So I formulate. And reformulate. And formulate it again in some way that I think exposes my personal views of this world we live in.

**CAK**

You reuse a lot of images. Snow. Fire. Birds. And there are many references to the body. How do you see these recurring images in your work?

**MA**

I guess those are probably counterpoints. If you talk about birds, fire, and . . . what was that other one?

**CAK**

Snow.



# MARTOS GALLERY

**MA**

Snow. Those are moments that transform me, that take me out of this world, like when I used to take heroin. I see recurring images in patterns, obsessions; like the birds—I have some kind of envy about flying. It is an interesting point of view that I'm missing on this planet. Then the fire has always been my obsession. When I was growing up, we had a beautiful house, but my father couldn't afford the money to put the coal in the furnace. But there were fireplaces everywhere, in all the rooms. And I would sleep with fire in the fireplace. I would peek from under my sheets and see the fire send big shadows onto the wall. So I guess that's maybe where it comes from.

*(BREAK IN TAPE)*

**CAK**

We were talking about the Moroccan tapes, which were done in a very stoned, kind of hippie time. You taped hours and hours of footage and then, 20 years later, went back and edited it into a piece. Now, of course you're clean, it's a whole different perspective. Can you talk a little bit about that? The experience of going back and re-editing that material compared to the experience of "being there" when it was shot.

**MA**

I shot the material in 1971; did a first edit in 1976, then a re-edit in 1993. Now, how do I feel about it? Some think I might be making a mistake by re-editing it from a different perspective. But I'm not destroying the edit I made in 1976. I keep it available. I'm re-editing the material and making a new work.

**CAK**

Recently, when you showed a tape shot in Morocco in the early '70s and re-edited in the late '80s to a student audience, you were criticized for recreating your experience into a homo-erotic piece to be sensational.

**MA**

That's right. That's right! But I was with homosexuals and they created the ambience and I recorded it my own way. I focused on the most interesting person in the group and he started to perform for me. And I was right, he was an extraordinary person. He acted out a whole fucking theme: first, by killing a seagull, gathering herbs and then cooking it in this instinctual way that is about survival; and secondly, by the on-camera seduction. He was the boyfriend or the hustler of a German artist. I'm describing only their behavior, not mine.

# MARTOS GALLERY

**CAK**

Does the theoretical deconstruction of culture and sexuality affect the way you tape and view things?

**MA**

Hopefully it hasn't. Politically correct is only politically correct as the day goes by. It doesn't matter how correct one is, it won't be correct later. I'm politically correct only with myself. It's a readjustment day by day, there's no formula.

**CAK**

Now the last tape you made, "Magnetic Notes: Voyage To The Center Of The Phone Lines" is video shot off a bluff looking out at the ocean and nature where you were in rehab. The audio was collected for over a year from conversations on car phones. This is a very different tape from what you've ever made before.

**MA**

Well that description you just gave is not what happened at all.

**CAK**

No?

**MA**

But I like that. I like that dream of rehabing by looking out of my window. In reality, rehab is a hospital for 30 days with no views.

**CAK**

I thought that's what you told me.

**MA**

Maybe I did. No. I was coming out of rehab—we rented a house and it was my first day out. And I got very lucky. I stayed in this beautiful house for two months watching the ocean all day long while I tried not to think about using heroin again. I had done landscapes before when I was on heroin too, but it just happens these landscapes were made then. But I like the way you describe it. I like people to project their own story when they see my work. The phone lines, the sound part of the tape is pretty much the way I do my work. I set up my traps in the phone lines, like a photographer for National Geographic trying to take a picture of mountain lions. I'm just setting my nets and catching fragments of conversation that reveal something about people, about us . . .

# MARTOS GALLERY

**CAK**

But these people are not invisible like you are.

**MA**

I'm not trying to expose the individual, or their privacy. I'm eavesdropping in on a universal stream-of-consciousness. The fears, the sadness, the state of things, the darkness of people. I feel I'm close to them.

**CAK**

Why did you use this as the audio track on the landscapes?

**MA**

I kept playing with the audio tapes for two years because I have a lot of them. I tried different images over them and nothing fucking worked. One day I started working with landscapes, I have many tapes of landscapes. You know, nature is beautifully boring. Nature and electronic signals are crossing all the time, but it's invisible and silent. You don't hear unless you have those trap machines. But it's all there around you. I felt that was the connection. And that's how it started.

**CAK**

That's a nice analogy, you used, casting a net. They do say "capturing an image" don't they?

**MA**

I used this scanner; it's like a camera. I scanned the phone conversation and recorded it on tape. I recorded 30 one-hour tapes and selected bits of conversation—it's mostly very sad, very intense.

**CAK**

What about Warhol? Did he give you any support?

**MA**

Andy was kind of taken aback by me. He was waiting to see if I would fail or survive. He saw me soaring in 1970—I got a movie produced and was in the press a lot. And then I smooshed myself up into almost nothing by 1975. He was always nice to me, and friendly. But Andy was always nice and friendly to everybody. So it's hard to tell what he thought. I was very close to him in the early 70s because of Viva. We used to see him almost every day. And then as life took its twists and turns—we had my daughter and we went to Morocco for a year. By then I had acquired my own identity and I couldn't really get too close to him because he would turn you into one of his minion.

# MARTOS GALLERY

## **CAK**

Well you've been involved with some pretty powerful women, too. I mean Viva and Cindy Sherman. How do you think that's affected your work?

## **MA**

Greatly. When I met Cindy I didn't realize she was so powerful. And I guess she never realized it either. Or maybe she did. I don't know. You know it's been ten years we've been together. She's one of the best—there are few contemporary artists that I think are better than me. I aspire to reach her level.