

Michael Auder

Sextant et plus

By Claire Moulène ☞

“Auder is a poet of moods, brief encounters, tragic moments of our miserable civilization. When I used to visit him at the Chelsea Hotel, around 1970, the video camera was always there, always going, a part of his house, a part of his life, eyes, hands. It still is. A most magnificent love affair: a life’s obsession.” These words, written in 1991 by Jonas Mekas, the other pope of the cinematic diary, confirm the importance of Michel Auder, today an illustrious unknown in France, an artist who in New York attained mythic status without ever becoming famous. Now reparation has been made with a retrospective showing most of his videos, films, and photographs.

Born in Soissons, France, in 1944, Auder moved to Paris in his late adolescence and worked there as a fashion photographer. He then became associated with the Zanzibar group, a collective of experimental filmmakers led by Philippe Garrel. Auder was fascinated by the New Wave and the films of Pasolini, and eventually with Andy Warhol’s *Chelsea Girls* (1966), which jolted his vision of cinema and convinced him to produce films that followed an aesthetics of marginality. At the same time, he crossed paths with Nico (the Factory muse who would go on to sing with the Velvet Underground) and even more consequentially with Viva, the Warhol “superstar” whom Auder would marry in Las Vegas in 1969. A series of films followed, including *Keeping Busy* (1969), fictionalizing Viva’s social and sexual escapades and modeled on the nonnarrative vérité diary. Auder ultimately moved to New York in 1970, settling into the Chelsea Hotel and putting out a new “trash” version of *Cleopatra* (1970), shown at the Cannes Film Festival, where even in a bowdlerized version it caused a scandal.

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This adventure would definitively mark Auder's orientation toward a more diaristic and mobile medium, the antithesis of Hollywood: video. An amateur and assiduous chronicler in the Mekas tradition, Auder films everything: his private life with Viva, their daughter's first steps, a garden party at John and Yoko's, but also the most ordinary activities—eating, kissing, calling people on the phone. At the heart of the triangular system in which he is not only “Viewer and Participant,” as the exhibition title has it, but also documenter, he archives and captures candid and painful moments that can then be arranged into a collective autobiography. Often described as the quintessential voyeur, Auder defends himself by systematically implicating himself in the environments he films and by using the camera as a tool for social interaction. At the same time, he establishes quasi-systematic distance between the events filmed and their reuse years later, as in the magnificent *My Last Bag of Heroin (For Real)*, 1986/93.

Several of Auder's projects of the '80s, when he kicked his habit and met his second wife, Cindy Sherman, involved television both as subject and material. This collection of remixes chronicling an epoch—specifically, the Reagan era—is composed of small gems, like the video about the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, *The Games: Olympic Variations*, 1984, with its simultaneous eroticization and mechanization of the body. Auder's work unfolds as a great intimate and social fresco punctuated by stolen moments, ordinary instants—and it's all the more fascinating for that.

—Claire Moulène

Translated from French by Jeanine Herman.
