Chantal Akerman
Facing the Image

an exhibition curated by

Claire Atherton

Conversation between Claire Atherton and Valentín Roma at La Virreina in Barcelona, in 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.

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

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.

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".*

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 fifteen 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…

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.

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.

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

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.

What you're describing is fascinating, Claire…

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

1. Mu Qi (mid-13th century), *Light over a Fishing Village*, painting in the collection of the Nezu Institute of Fine Arts, Japan, reproduced in François Cheng's book, *L'Espace du rêve. Mille ans de peinture chinoise* (Paris: Phébus, 1980)

2. Installation view, *D'Est, au bord de la fiction* (1995), Eye Filmmuseum, Amsterdam, 2020

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 *La 25e 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.

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?

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 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.

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.

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* [The Bedroom] (2007).

Although it eludes my previous question, I find what you've done very interesting, given that beginning the exhibition 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.*

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 that the *Prelude*, which is now close the end, right before the tribute.

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 *[Nightfall in 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 *[Down There] (2006). There are three different rhythms that are complementary and yet at the same time distinct.*

I totally agree. And that echoes with the name of this place, "Centre of the Image", 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 *L'État du monde* [The State of the World] (2007), which also featured the directors Aisha Abraham, Wang Bing, Pedro Costa, Vicente Ferraz, and


AURORA

3. Opposite: Installation view, *Tombée de nuit sur Shanghai* (2007), Eye Filmmuseum, Amsterdam, 2020
4. Above: Film still from *La Chambre* (1972-2007)

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.

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.

Thank you very much!

Let's talk about Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide *[Walking Next to One's Shoelaces in an Empty Fridge] (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.*

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 diptych. 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.

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.

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.

In closing, can we talk about Je tu il elle, l'installation *[I you he she, the Installation] (2007), which is based on the 1974 film?*

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.

Thank you very much, Claire.

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.


we would go from one camp to another,

On Chantal Akerman's Works at Artium Museoa

Beatriz Herráez

This exhibition dedicated to Chantal Akerman (Brussels, 1950 – Paris, 2015) offers us a journey through some of the installations that arose from the close collaboration between the filmmaker and the curator, Claire Atherton, the editor of her films since the mid-1980s. Bringing together moving image and photography, the show acts as the second episode of the exhibition project presented at La Virreina Centre de la Imatge in Barcelona between November 2023 and April 2024. This new presentation maintains the original curatorial premises while adding a museum itinerary that unfolds through a succession of spaces that position the spectator's body at the center of the work.

Like a system of communicating vessels that connect image and text, the works in the exhibition are arranged as a circular journey to occupy the museum's space. As in her film production, these works are constructed as a bricolage of time and narrative, with the exhibition space added to this as an active element. From this place—as it occurs on the screen—new forms of relationship are proposed that question the very definition of the human as viewed from a feminist perspective.

Facing the Image begins with the work *La Chambre* (1972-2007) and ends with Claire Atherton's tribute to Chantal Akerman, a text that sheds light on Akerman's way of working. It was written and read by Atherton at the homage to the filmmaker held at the Cinémathèque Française on 16 November 2015, following her death. Akerman's last film, *No Home Movie* (2015), was also screened at this event.

The itinerary continues with *Tombée de nuit sur Shanghai* (2009), an installation made from the film of the same name, that forms part of the collective film *L'État du monde* (2007), which also included the participation of the filmmakers Pedro Costa, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Vicente Ferraz and Wang Bing. If the presence of

Previous pages:

5. Left: Installation view, *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide* (2004), Camden Arts Museum London, 2008

6. Right: Film still from *Une voix dans le désert* (2002)

humans is a constant in her work, in *Shanghai* it is diluted in a landscape saturated by the lights and advertising screens that dominate the skyline of a strange city, an unfamiliar metropolis.

By contrast, the installation *Femmes d'Anvers en novembre* [Women in Antwerp in November] (2009), shown for the first time as part of the project presented at Artium Museoa, offers a landscape-tableau that features women smoking. Close-ups of faces in front of the camera, figures wandering through dark streets in black and white, women smoking in groups or alone, lost in their thoughts: a portrait of ordinary women that nevertheless reveals a powerful, disturbing intimacy.

The works *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide* (2004) and *My Mother Laughs Prelude* (2012) address one of the main concerns in Akerman's work: her relationship with her mother, a Holocaust survivor, and through her, the biographical trauma of her family's disappearance in a Nazi death camp. This resonance between the filmmaker's voice and that of her mother can be traced back to *News from Home* (1976), as part of an epistolary exchange that is transformed in *Marcher à côté* from letters sent by her mother read aloud in New York City to the reading of a letter written in Polish by her grandmother and interpreted by Natalia Akerman in her Brussels apartment.

The exhibition also includes *Je tu il elle, l'installation* (2007), an installation featuring Akerman herself that is based on her eponymous film from 1974, made a year before her acclaimed second feature, *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. Both films appeared against a backdrop marked by the feminist thinking of the 1970s and the positioning and questioning of the canon by women artists, filmmakers, historians and critics. In the words of feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey: "Chantal Akerman transforms cinema, itself so often used as

an instrument of women's oppression, into a liberating force."* A shift that is evident in *Je tu il elle*, which foregrounds the representation of sexuality from a self-reflexive gaze, featuring and enunciated by the director's camera.

The collaboration between Akerman and Atherton led in 1995 to Akerman's first installation, *D'Est, au bord de la fiction*. This work, based on the film *D'Est*, is present in this exhibition through the photographic series associated with *Untitled D'Est* (1998). In the same manner as her films, the installations conceived in collaboration with Atherton since the mid-1990s share this political and feminist dimension, shifting rhythm, repetition and cinematographic temporality beyond the screen to the body of the spectator immersed in the exhibition space.

The series *Là-bas* (2006), linked to the documentary of the same name filmed from inside an apartment during Akerman's stay in Tel Aviv, completes the presence of photography in the exhibition. This abode connects to other interiors—*La Chambre*, her mother's living room, or the bedroom in *Je tu il elle*—in a re-signification of the domestic realms in which her narratives unfold.

The exhibition culminates with *A Voice in the Desert* (2002), an installation that forms part of the *From the Other Side* project presented at Documenta 11 (Kassel, 2002). In this work, Akerman deals with the human displacement that occurs on the border between Mexico and the United States. In Spanish and English, she personally recounts the story of a migrant, "David's mother", whose trail is lost when the exchange of letters with her family on the other side of the border comes to a halt. The letters and autobiographical testimonies—like the diary written by Akerman's grandmother in the 1920s—resurface here as witnesses to a fragmented memory that crosses time, space and generations.

* Laura Mulvey on Chantal Akerman, *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1070 Bruxelles*, 8 January 2024. https://www.museoreinasofia.es/multimedia/laura-mulvey-sobre-chantal-akerman

Facing the Image transcends the scope of the filmmaker's work, resonating in the productions of her contemporaries and those of other women authors, as well as in the works of artists who have been part of this museum's programme. In the reference and acknowledgement made by Moyra Davey in *Hemlock Forest* (2016) when she films the New York subway in the same way as Chantal Akerman and Babette Mangolte did in *News from Home* (1976), or in the portraits of women with bags wandering the streets of Moscow on Sunday shot by Anna Daučíková, *Moscow / Women / Sunday* (1989-90), in her own displacement towards the east.

A work, Chantal Akerman's, that constructs and projects genealogies, and that intertwines the lives of women, of those who form part of her autobiography–Polish survivors of the Holocaust—with migrant women from Mexico, not only in the USA, but also those caring for Akerman's mother in her Brussels apartment. A network of care and collaboration, also between the filmmaker and Claire Atherton, from which a political thought and way of positioning herself as a filmmaker in the world unfolds, which is at the origin of this exhibition.

La Chambre

2007

THE BEDROOM

Single projection video installation,
16 mm film transferred to digital file,
color, silent
Running time: 10 min 26 s (looped)
Made from the film *La Chambre* (1972)
Cast and director: Chantal Akerman
Editing and spatial concept: Claire Atherton
Courtesy of Fondation Chantal Akerman
and Marian Goodman Gallery

7. Installation view, Rio Oi Futuro, 2018

La Chambre is a completely experimental project, which I shot the day after we finished filming *Hotel Monterey*. The camera makes a single rotating movement, repeated several times, then suddenly changes directions. The shock in the viewer's brain comes from this break with a rhythm he believed immutable.

Chantal Akerman, "Je voudrais que mes films ne plaisent plus seulement aux critiques et aux cinéphiles", interview with Jacques De Decker, *Le Soir*, January 14, 1981, p. 19

Chantal wanted us to work on an installation based on *La Chambre* for an exhibition featuring pieces by artists using their bodies in front of and behind the camera. In the film, two 360° pans describe a room: an armchair, a table with fruit, a kettle, a chest of drawers, then a bed where we discover Chantal half lying down. The third pan is interrupted before it finishes a full revolution; the camera changes direction and we see Chantal eating an apple. By watching the film several times in a row, without stopping, we sensed that the looping effect reinforced the impression of perpetual movement created by the triple pan. So we decided to project the film in a loop, and thought we would install it in such a way that the viewer could face it in a standing positing. We liked the abrupt passage from the last camera movement on the beige wall to the still shot of the red armchair. The appearance of a cut created a surprise that echoed the "shock" of the change of direction.

Claire Atherton, February 2025

Tombée de nuit sur Shanghai

2009

NIGHTFALL IN SHANGHAI

Single projection video installation, color, sound
With two illuminated fake Chinese aquariums
Running time: 14 min (looped)
Made from the film *Tombée de nuit sur Shanghai*
(part of the anthology film *L'État du monde*, 2007)
Photography and director: Chantal Akerman
Image/sound editing and spatial concept:
Claire Atherton
Courtesy of Fondation Chantal Akerman
and Marian Goodman Gallery

8. Installation view, Casa Masaccio, 2022

Beyond sound, beyond images, without the slightest hierarchy, Mona Lisa rubs shoulders with an animated film and Chopin with 1970s and 1980s American music in a kind of ambiguous pleasure.

When I was asked to make a film about the state of the world, I felt overwhelmed by such a vast subject. I told myself that my street, rue de Ménilmontant, is also part of the state of the world. But I don't see it anymore because I see it every day. So I decided to get some distance to be able to see. I went to Shanghai, which is far away, and I had never been there. There I saw a world where images are everywhere, where every culture is mixed together in a deafening concert, all of that in video—boats and buildings are nothing but huge screens there. It's a pleasure to be there, but there's something else to it too, it makes you think even more about images being set up as totems.

Chantal Akerman, *Tombée de nuit sur Shanghai* (2009), *Œuvre écrite et parlée*, Paris, L'Arachnéen, 2024, p.1161

In December 2009, we were putting together the installation *Maniac Summer* in the basement of the Marian Goodman Gallery in Paris. Chantal referred to it as an orphan film, without a subject or an object. It was projected on the lefthand wall, then taken apart and multiplied in the center, then finally completely shattered on the righthand wall. Once we tried breaking apart the film in the basement space, we felt we needed other images and sounds to play the part of a prelude on the ground floor. And that's when we thought of *Tombée de nuit sur Shanghai*, a film we had finished two years earlier. Just like *Maniac Summer*, it's a film that works with the multiplication of images, but inside a single frame. In the bay of

Shanghai, at night, every space becomes a screen: the boats, walls, and buildings on which advertising images, American cartoon characters, and the Mona Lisa succeed each other higgledy-piggledy, in a maelstrom of music.

When we finished editing the film, I gave Chantal two illuminated Chinese aquariums, gadget-images that echoed the giant gadget-images in Shanghai. She called them the little fish boxes.

When we spatialized *Tombée de nuit sur Shanghai* on the gallery's ground floor, we decided to put the two Chinese aquariums at the foot of the projected images. We felt that this somewhat caricatural, nearly mocking counterpoint could help the viewer get some distance, ask questions, and not fall into worshipping "images set up as totems". That's how the installation *Tombée de nuit sur Shanghai* came to be.

Claire Atherton, February 2025

Femmes d'Anvers en novembre

2008

WOMEN FROM ANTWERP
IN NOVEMBER

Multiple projections video installation,
color and black and white, silent
The Landscape (wall of 5 images)
Running time: 20 minutes (looped)
The Black & White Square Portrait
Running time: 4 minutes (looped)
Direction: Chantal Akerman
Photography: Rémon Fromont
Editing and spatial concept: Claire Atherton
Courtesy of Fondation Chantal Akerman
and Marian Goodman Gallery

9. Installation view, Casa Masaccio, 2022

It started with an artist who asked me to make a film for a performance with women dancers. He asked me to film them smoking in the streets of Antwerp. I wanted to do it in black and white, on three screens, so that the relationship to the performance would be more abstract.
Then I told my friend Claire Atherton, who has also been my editor for 22 years, that I wanted us to reedit these images differently and make our own installation. And we went back to work. We made something completely different, freer. We put a few images back into color, and we played with them. Of course we knew these were women and that they were smoking, but what guided us was the relationship to shapes, to positions, to movements. No meaning, no significance, no narration…
First we constructed a series of 5 screens, which stretch horizontally and which we called "landscape". Next to that we put the "portrait", a very large image, an almost fascinating face, like the classical figure in art.
There's no sound because it's not realism. It's choreography, it's presence.
We liked the fact that there wasn't any narration. The viewer can develop his own, that's freedom. (…)
When we were working on this installation, we had the impression that time was moving both vertically and horizontally.

Chantal Akerman, "À propos des Femmes d'Anvers" (2009), *Œuvre écrite et parlée*,
Paris, L'Arachnéen, 2024, p.1158

Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide

2004

WALKING NEXT TO ONE'S SHOELACES IN AN EMPTY FRIDGE

Multiple projections video installation,
black and white, sound
Running time: tulle screen, 8 min (looped);
wall diptych, 24 min (looped).
Second part of the installation composed
of two rooms
A silent sequence of images from the diary
of Chantal Akerman's grandmother is projected
on the suspended screen. A diptych of
a conversation between Chantal Akerman
and her mother is projected on the wall.
Director: Chantal Akerman
Black and white images re-filmed by
Chantal Akerman and Claire Atherton
Image/sound editing and spatial concept:
Claire Atherton
Courtesy of Fondation Chantal Akerman
and Marian Goodman Gallery

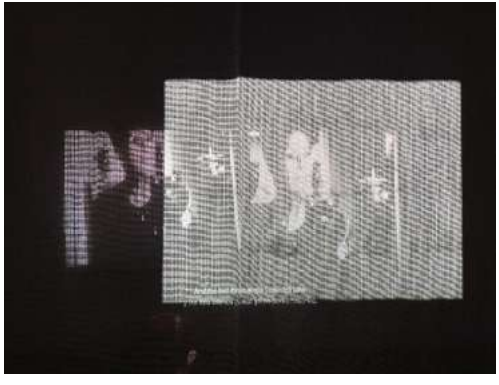
Everything started from the notebook, my grandmother's notebook.
The only thing we have left, my mother always says.
Often I rehash and work with what is missing, or with nothing as my mother also says. Here, I worked with what we have left. Not much and yet a whole world.

Chantal Akerman, "Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide" (2004),
Œuvre écrite et parlée, Paris, L'Arachnéen, 2024, p. 1022

This installation explores the contents of the diary of Chantal's grandmother, a document found after her deportation and death in Auschwitz. It was constructed from a filmed conversation between Chantal and her mother for a behind-the-scenes documentary on the film *Demain on déménage* [Tomorrow We Move]. During this dialogue, they look at and try to decipher Chantal's grandmother's diary, which was written in Polish. They talk about memories, the fact of being a woman, the grandmother, her life in the camps, history.
When we got together to work on the installation, Chantal had never watched the footage of the conversation, but she remembered this moment spent with her mother. We discovered the images together.
We were very moved, but we felt a form needed to be found to make the relation to the intimacy between Chantal and her mother less literal.
A distance needed to be created, a shift, to move out of the context of the filmed interview and achieve something more essential.
First I edited the conversation, then we screened it on a television monitor we set to black and white, and we re-filmed it several times, wandering around the image, zooming at certain moments. Then we made a diptych with these transformed images. Next we filmed pages from the notebook,

with the same camera. We had the impression we were caressing the pages. We chose three shots from these images, and we made a triptych. So, we had a diptych of the conversation between Chantal and her mother, and a triptych of the images of the notebook. We told ourselves that we only wanted a single projection axis, and that the notebook should be at the center of the installation. That's how we came to the idea of projecting the notebook on a tulle screen, so the viewer would be able to glimpse images of the conversation through the fabric. He or she could also get closer to it by walking around the screen and sitting on a bench placed right in front of the projected images.

Claire Atherton, February 2025



10-11. Installation views, La Virreina, Barcelona, 2023 (left), Eye FilmMuseum, Amsterdam, 2020 (right)

Untitled (D’Est)

1998

UNTITLED (FROM THE EAST)

Set of 14 color photographs
Laminated Cibachrome prints mounted on aluminum
50 × 60 cm
Courtesy of Fondation Chantal Akerman and Marian Goodman Gallery

The series of photos from *D’Est* was conceived a few years after the installation *D’Est, au bord de la fiction* [From the East: Bordering on Fiction]. This was in 1998, for the exhibition *Selfportrait / Autobiography: A Work In Progress* in London. Chantal wanted to exhibit still images from *D’Est* in dialogue with this new installation. The selection of photos became apparent to us very quickly. We could have returned to the analogue format, but Chantal was attached to the installation’s original video aspect.

Claire Atherton, February 2025

12. Photograph of a video screen from the installation *D’Est, au bord de la fiction*

Là-bas

2006

DOWN THERE

Set of seven color photographs
Digital prints
50.5 × 90 cm
Courtesy of Fondation Chantal Akerman
and Marian Goodman Gallery

I was looking out the window, a window covered in very thin straw blinds, with very thin strips, with very thin interstices, so I could see through it; I could see, but people couldn't see me, at least I think so.
And it was like a stage.

Chantal Akerman, interview Frank Nouchi, press release for the film, 2006

We made stills from the film as soon as we finished editing in 2006. Two years later, we chose a series of 7, which was exhibited at Le Fresnoy in 2008 and was presented as an installation on that occasion.

Claire Atherton, February 2025

13. Film still from *Là-bas*

Je tu il elle, l'installation

2007

I YOU HE SHE, THE INSTALLATION

Three projections video installation,
black and white, sound
Running time: 20 min 8 s (looped)
Made from the 35 mm film *Je tu il elle* (1974)
Director: Chantal Akerman
Image/sound editing and spatial concept:
Claire Atherton
Courtesy of Fondation Chantal Akerman
and Marian Goodman Gallery

14-15. Installation views, La Virreina, Barcelona, 2023-2024 (left),
Galerie Marian Goodman, Paris, 2021 (right)

The film is composed of three moments in time that are the actual time of the situations experienced. Aside from the time of reportage, the time of he, there is the time of I, which is the most fantasized, a time that is not in contact with the outside, and the time of she which is the time of the psychological, where time is conditioned by what happens between two people whose paths cross.

Chantal Akerman, "entretien du dossier de presse de *Je tu il elle*" (1975), *Œuvre écrite et parlée*, Paris, L'Arachnéen, 2024, p. 63

Since we had discovered montage in space with the installation *D'Est, au bord de la fiction*, Chantal often told me that *Je tu il elle* could also be an installation. The exhibition featuring works by artists who used their bodies in front of and behind the camera, for which we had conceived *La Chambre*, gave us an opportunity to work on that. We told ourselves that the film's three moments in time could be assembled, i.e. projected simultaneously, next to each other. We tried it. Our eyes sometimes focused on one of the three images, sometimes on the one next to it, and sometimes we stepped back to see two of them, or even all three together. The movements answered each other, the sounds blended. The juxtaposition of the images gave the narration a different form, one that was less linear and more choreographic. We adjusted the rhythm, and then we felt it was right.

Claire Atherton, February 2025

My Mother Laughs, Prelude

2012

Single projection video installation,
color, sound
Running time: 27 min 16 s (looped)
This work was originally created for
the installation *Maniac Shadows* (2012).
Chantal Akerman reads the first pages
of her book *My Mother Laughs*.
Director: Chantal Akerman
Editing and spatial concept: Claire Atherton
Courtesy of Fondation Chantal Akerman
and Marian Goodman Gallery

16. Film still from the installation

Chantal got in front of the camera, and read the beginning of *My Mother Laughs* in English. She didn't want too much light. We only did one take. This reading was projected with the presentation of *Maniac Shadows* at The Kitchen (New York City), and has been a part of that work since then. Chantal liked the contrast between the chaos of images in the installation and the gentleness of this reading.

Claire Atherton, February 2025

Photo Wall (Maniac Shadows)

2012

This set of 96 inkjets prints was composed for the installation *Maniac Shadows* (2012). Courtesy of Fondation Chantal Akerman and Marian Goodman Gallery

17. Installation view, La Virreina, Barcelona, 2023-2024

Une voix dans le désert

2002

A VOICE IN THE DESERT

Single projection video installation, color, sound
Running time: 52 min (looped)
Third part of the installation *From the Other Side*.
The last sequence of the film *De l'autre côté*
[From the Other Side] was projected onto a screen
installed in the Arizona desert in June 2002.
This projection was then re-filmed with Chantal
Akerman's voice alternating between English
and Spanish.
Director: Chantal Akerman
Editing and spatial concept: Claire Atherton
Courtesy of Fondation Chantal Akerman
and Marian Goodman Gallery

In the Arizona desert, at the border, between two mountains, one American, the other Mexican, a screen with a 32-foot base was set up. On this screen were projected the last minutes of the film *De l'autre côté*. These images and sounds were heard and seen on both sides of the border, the Spanish rang out in the United States as well as in Mexico, the English in Mexico as well as in the United States.
We filmed this screen in the desert surrounded by two mountains for entire days and nights.
Of all these images, we chose one hour, a shot that begins at the end of the night and finishes at the beginning of the day.

Chantal Akerman, "Une voix dans le désert" (2003), *Œuvre écrite et parlée*, Paris, L'Arachnéen, 2024, p. 988

While we were at Documenta in Kassel, Germany, to set up the installation *From the Other Side*, a crew was at the border between Mexico and the United States at the same moment, to set up the giant screen and film it. Chantal had given them all the instructions for how to frame the shot: the two mountains, the soil in the foreground, the proportions.
The sequence projected in the desert was the film's last sequence, video-surveillance images of American border patrols followed by a forward dolly shot on a highway to Los Angeles, with Chantal's voice alternating between Spanish and English to tell the story of David's mother, a Mexican immigrant woman who disappeared in the United States.
That morning in Kassel, we could barely see the two mountains on the image broadcast to us, for it was still night in Mexico. On the other hand, we could see the image of the film projected on the giant screen very clearly. Then as the day progressed in Kassel, the sun rose in Mexico,

the mountains appeared and the image on screen faded. We could still hear Chantal's voice mixing with the wind.
The following year, we got together to watch the footage from that night, the images that had been broadcast to Kassel on a loop. And we made a one-hour edit of it, which Chantal called *A Voice in the desert*.

Claire Atherton, February 2025

18. Film still, *De l'autre côté* (2002)

Following pages: 19-20. Site of the screen for *Une voix dans le désert*, Sonora Desert, US-Mexico border, 2002

Tribute to Chantal Akerman by Claire Atherton

This text was written and read by Claire Atherton during the homage to Chantal Akerman at the Cinémathèque française on November 16, 2015, before the premiere of *No Home Movie*.
Running time:
Sound recording of the French text read by Claire Atherton during the homage, 10 min
Scrolling of the English wall text, 17 min
Courtesy of Claire Atherton

21. Installation view, La Virreina, Barcelona, 2023-2024

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This edition has been published to mark the exhibition *Chantal Akerman. Facing the image* produced by Artium Museoa, Museum of Contemporary Art of the Basque Country, and held in Vitoria-Gasteiz from 30 May to 19 October 2025.

EXHIBITION

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Installation
Arteka Une eta Gestioa

Insurance
Alkora

Transport
Cloister Services 2000 S.L

With the collaboration of

Ajuntament de Barcelona [LA VIRREINA] CENTRE DE LA IMATGE

With the support of

FONDATION CHANTAL AKERMAN

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

Acknowledgements
Fondation Chantal Akerman
Marian Goodman Gallery
La Virreina Centre de la Imatge

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Graphic Design and Layout
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Photoengraving
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Printing
Provincial Council of Alava

Legal Deposit
LG G 00197-2025

Number of copies
750

ARTIUM
MUSEOA

Euskal Herriko Arte Garaikidearen Museoa
Museo de Arte Contemporáneo del País Vasco
Museum of Contemporary Art of the Basque Country