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This is an author's accepted manuscript of an article published in the *Moving Image Review & Art Journal* 4 (1&2) 287-292, 2015.

The final definitive version is available online at: https://dx.doi.org/10.1386/miraj.4.1-2.288_1

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OBITUARY

Au revoir, Chantal

by Michael Mazière

Ne me lâche pas, pas encore. Je ne suis pas prête et peut être que je ne serais
jamais prête. Chantal Akerman
(2013)¹

At Ambika P3 London, we have just opened Chantal Akerman: *NOW* an exhibition of seven installation works by the acclaimed Belgian film-maker and artist.

Summarizing Chantal's achievements over a 44-year career, Adam Roberts wrote:

Chantal Akerman is widely considered to be one of the most unpredictable, farsighted, indefinable, rigorous and playful film artists of her generation.

While showing the troublesome complexity of human existence, Akerman's works are filled with beautiful imagery, music, magic of chance, yearning and hope, yet she also investigates hot-button themes such as racism in the American South, illegal immigration, and terrorism in the Middle East.

Chantal Akerman was one of the first to move from independent film-making to embrace the gallery space in the mid 1990s. Her work pursues her

¹ Chantal Akerman (2013), 'Do not let me go, not yet. I am not ready and maybe I will never be ready' from *Ma Mère Rit*, Paris: Mercure de France.

obsession with borders and tensions between documentary and fiction,
between her mother and herself, between chaos and control, art and history.²

Chantal took her own life on Monday 5 October 2015 at the age of 65, just three weeks before the exhibition was to open. The curators A Nos Amours (Joanna Hogg, Adam Roberts) and myself had been working closely with Chantal on the exhibition for over eighteen months.

I first met Chantal in May 2014, at the ICA screening of *Un Jour Pina a Demandé* (1983) and *L'Homme à la Valise* (1983) organised by A Nos Amours. After the film, she spoke with great passion about the challenges of working with Pina Bausch. She also discussed her 1975 film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* and the impact of the film's success on her life:

I still want to make movies but in a way I could have stopped because I had reached a point I was heading since I was 18 and probably all my life and that would had been enough. So I tried to make comedy, to make this or that, just to get rid of Jeanne Dielman because it was a curse on my shoulders. And I thought how can I keep going after that but I wanted to keep going just because I love the making of film but I knew I had reached a point that maybe I would never reach again.³

² Adam Roberts (2015), extract of press release for the exhibition Chantal Akerman *NOW*, London: Ambika P3, November.

³ Chantal Akerman speaking to a live audience? at the ICA, 22 May 2014.

The following day, we had our first production meeting at Ambika P3. For most of the meeting Chantal talked with great frankness about her personal life and the dreadful impact of the recent death of her mother. She mixed the political and the personal with her distinct disinterest in boundaries of any kind. They say that meeting your heroes is never good, but this was a fascinating and sometimes shocking encounter. Chantal gave us an insight into what really matters within a person – the reason for their existence, their fears, their ambitions and personal histories. We barely engaged with the issue at hand, the project, the space, and the works to be selected, but it was an invaluable afternoon that would seal my commitment to exhibiting her installations. Like many people, I had only seen Chantal's early, iconic works of the 1970's, in particular her films *News from Home* (1977), *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* (1974) and *Hotel Monterey* (1972), and had only recently connected with her later work.

In particular her installation work was largely unknown in the United Kingdom and rarely shown. Developing the exhibition was extremely challenging, firstly because we wanted to present as much content as possible (we started with nine works but cut them down to seven). Secondly, many works had complex and precise requirements in terms of space, projection and sound. Thirdly, Chantal was living in Paris and not always accessible. A new Commission *NOW*, was in development for the Venice Biennale and was to be the centerpiece of our exhibition, but its configuration kept changing.

At our meetings, Carole Billy, Exhibition Manager at Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris, always accompanied Chantal. Carole played an invaluable role as a go between

as Chantal was not the most consistent of communicators – unless she was in right front of you. Chantal and I connected quickly through our shared French language and we had many quick fire conversations in French in the middle of production meetings. She was always saying ‘*comment on dit ...?*’ and I tried my best to convey her French perspective to English. She was fluent in English but you could see that she thought in French.

Many variations on the layout, design and selected works took place over that 18-month period – I think that Chantal wanted the audience to travel through her work in the space, as she had travelled through the world making them. She had a distinct idea of how each work should be positioned in relation to the next, and a specific itinerary in mind for the audience. So the logic of space, sound, content and scale were not the only guiding factors in the layout – they all came into play within the framework of her imaginary itinerary. She was forceful but open to suggestions and new ideas and strategies for the exhibition.

NOW opened in Venice as part of the Arsenale exhibition ‘All the World’s Futures’ curated by Okwui Enwezor on 6 May 2015. Amongst the hundreds of works at the Arsenale was a distinctive large white box. Upon entry, one was assaulted by a densely layered soundtrack of skylarks, screams, the sound of helicopters, thuds, engine noise, gunshots, explosions, wind while on five hanging Perspex screens were projected a suite of films shot of the empty desert from a car travelling in violently contested regions of the Middle East. It was mesmerizing and hard for the audience. She had told me she wanted to transmit ‘the claustrophobia of war’. At the back stood two fake Chinese fishtanks surrounded by plastic flowers and coloured neon. Maybe

they proposed an antithesis to the violence of the installation; but not for long. The densely layered and sometimes overbearing soundtrack operated as the driving narrative and the images functioned as backdrops – she had inverted the conventional hierarchy of sound and image. In October this year, Chantal was interviewed by Oliver Bennet who asked her about the installation of the work:

NOW, is on 5 channels – it would be great to know what you think are the benefits of multi-channel work and how it differs from a single channel piece and indeed, how (and if) it affects the ‘reading’ of the film in a narrative sense? Is there a monumental or immersive aspect that is important here?

Chantal answered him in terms of a choreography of movements and flows:

NOW is a piece for five looped channels. It is like choreography. The images talk to each other. As you move through the room you will get different impressions. In the case of *NOW* the impressions are mostly generated because the soundtracks of the first two screens evoke fear before a war, the next two, war, and the fifth, the rest of the world. You can always construct a narrative, but in the case of *NOW* it happens as the audience passes through the work and that is very different from a single projection. You can stop and find yourself immersed in the surround sound and image. But you can also stop just before the five screens and find something monumental, so I would say that the work is both immersive and monumental.⁴

⁴ Chantal Akerman interviewed by Oliver Bennet for *Art Quaterly*, 30 October 2015. To be published in November 2015.

The final configuration of *NOW* at Ambika P3 was different to what we had anticipated. It was a larger, more ambitious piece, devoid of people and the many different visual forms and styles Chantal had used in her earlier works. It is a breakthrough work, a departure. Chantal had been working away with her long time editor and friend Claire Atherton, testing out different configurations for the work in her Paris apartment. Claire told me she would raise and lower screens with cigarette packets in order to adjust their height and position. She was not a conceptualist, she developed her work through process, always questioning her own decisions and aiming to meet the extraordinarily high standards she set herself for all her work.

After the Venice Biennale, which opened in May 2015, our meetings with Chantal stopped. She was ‘not well’, and we were not told any more than that. I wrote the funding applications and we pursued the development of the project with the support of her gallery and designer. Then it was a case of waiting for her to be well enough to come to London and finalise the layout.

Chantal came back to the gallery on the 15 July 2015 and we spent the day finalising all aspects of the exhibition. I noticed that her hair was chopped short. She said she had done it herself. She looked tired. We walked around the Ambika P3 space together and then set up a chair for her – she sat in the middle of the space – her tiny frame in this vast bunker. However, we felt we had nearly cracked it. The funding was coming in, the layout was all but finalised. The only issue was that the cost of staging *NOW* had rocketed. We looked at simplifying *NOW*, discussing the fine detail such as using drapes instead of walls but it was impossible. ‘*Mais Michael ça ne*

marchera pas! ('But, Michael, it won't work'), said Chantal. She was right – it had to be exactly as she had planned and wanted it.

On the morning of the 6 October I was accompanying my wife for a doctor's appointment. I picked up emails in the waiting room – among them a mail from Ambika P3 read:

Michael,

We've just seen a facebook message saying Chantal has died. Is that true?

Have tried to call you but can't get through.

Let me know, Heather.

I walked into the doctor's room and started crying quietly. 'Someone has died', I said.

NOW opened at Ambika P3 on the 29th of October as planned.⁵ Chantal rests at the Cimetière du Père-Lachaise, alongside many of her creative peers. The ceremony was very moving and was led by the liberal Jewish Rabbi Delphine Horvilleur.⁶ Chantal is gone but she feels very present at Ambika P3 and as a colleague said 'her death

⁵ Chantal Akerman: *NOW* is jointly curated by Ambika P3 (Michael Mazière) and A Nos Amours (Joanna Hogg and Adam Roberts) and presented in association with Marian Goodman Gallery. It is supported with funding from Arts Council England, Marian Goodman Gallery and the University of Westminster.

⁶ Delphine Horvilleur is France's third female rabbi, and (as of 2012) editor-in-Chief of the quarterly Jewish magazine *Revue de pensées juives 'Tenou'a'*. She leads a congregation in Paris, and is currently co-leading the Liberal Jewish Movement of France, a Jewish liberal cultural and religious association affiliated to the World Union for Progressive Judaism, which she joined in 2008. The text of the ceremony can be found here in French: <http://tenoua.org/chantal-akerman/>. Accessed 13 November 2015.

seems to have provided a way in for the audience, a key to a better understanding of her work'.⁷

We shall never know.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Mohammed Ali, Claire Atherton, Carole Billy, Heather Blair, Joanna Hogg, Andrew Leslie Heyward, Christian Newton, Adam Roberts, Jonathan Samuels, Pascal Willekens and the Vidi-Square team.

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⁷ Adrian Searle's piece article 'The last picture show: how Chantal Akerman's suicide alters her final artwork' is a good reference point in relation to this notion. *The Guardian*, 4 November 2015. Available online: <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/nov/04/chantal-akerman-death-now-ambika-p3-film-installation>. Accessed 13 November 2015.