

# *The disappearing work: Chantal Akerman and phenomenologies of the ephemeral*

Article

Accepted Version

Chamarette, J. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0701-1514>  
(2013) The disappearing work: Chantal Akerman and phenomenologies of the ephemeral. *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 17 (3). pp. 347-356. ISSN 1740-9292  
doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17409292.2013.790631> Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/92949/>

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To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17409292.2013.790631>

Publisher: Informa UK Limited

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## **The Disappearing Work: Chantal Akerman and Phenomenologies of the Ephemeral**

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### **Abstract:**

In this article I argue that thresholds of attention or distraction provoke a phenomenological engagement with the ephemerality of moving image installations. Thus, patterns of spectatorial attention and distraction offer a potential methodology to examine ephemeral installations which exist for a limited duration, in particular in exhibition spaces. The article probes a range of conceptualisations of attention with relation to contemporary phenomenological film theory, and performance theory, in order to stage a reflective encounter with Chantal Akerman's recent installation, *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un Frigidaire vide (To Walk Beside One's Shoelaces in an Empty Fridge, 2004)*. It ultimately argues that engaging with a phenomenology of the ephemeral may act as a corrective balance to the narrativising and canon-building tendencies in recent film criticism of Akerman's work.

### **Article**

By forcing the spectator to engage physically in an act of attention or distraction – by moving towards or away from the film itself – the film's critical discourses of the apparatus are complicated, and the spectator's own interest in continuing or discontinuing participation is actively engaged. (Butler 2003: 165)

In her article, 'Bordering on Fiction: Chantal Akerman's *From the East*', Kristin Butler comments on the filmmaker's 1995 exhibition of moving image and video installations, *Chantal Akerman, D'Est: au bord de la fiction*. Butler highlights the interrelations between Akerman's film, *D'Est*, and the installations, foregrounding spectatorial strategies of attention and inattention. Aside from echoing the pertinent socio-historical associations between the moving image and early 19<sup>th</sup> century spectacle as evinced in Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer*, the attention Butler evokes also speaks prominently to recent phenomenological approaches to artworks in contemporary cultural production (Crary 1990). Attention, inattention and distraction are issues which necessitate an awareness of the nature of an encounter with an artwork, rather than imagining the artwork as somehow external to the moment in which it is experienced.

In this article I argue that thresholds of attention or distraction provoke a phenomenological engagement with the ephemerality of moving image installations, specifically in Akerman's most recent work since 2004. Consequently, the aims of this article are twofold. The first is to consider what a hybrid, contemporary phenomenological approach to an artwork might yield, when no permanent and verisimilitudinous version of the artwork can be retained. How can phenomenological approaches productively illuminate ephemeral moving image works, when the encounter with the installation itself is temporally limited, site specific and not fully recordable or transferable – when the work itself disappears? Ephemerality, and passing, inconsequential time, then, become constituent parts of the perambulatory sense-making process. One response to the interpretative paradox of ephemerality lies in the significance of attention and inattention, and of the de-narrativising, heterogeneous strategies that a phenomenological approach tends to employ. Secondly, the article discusses hybrid phenomenologies of attention in the light of a work specifically concerned with thematic and formal questions of ephemerality: Chantal Akerman's recent installation, *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un Frigidaire vide* (2004).

### **Phenomenology and 'ephemeral media'**

Phenomenological or post-phenomenological approaches to film and audio-visual media have become popular in the wake of the post-structuralist and psychoanalytic film theory of the 1970s and 80s. Such approaches attend to the eclectic phenomena of personal, embodied, individuated, eclectic and dissonant encounters with the audio-visual image that extend beyond the art work: to inattention as much as to engagement. One recent strand of phenomenological approach to audio-visual media and the moving image has adopted a critical heritage that tends to



assume the overtones of a Merleau-Pontian concept of 'enworldedness', rather than, for example, an engagement with a Husserlian '*epoche*'.<sup>1</sup> Notions of 'enworldedness' in contemporary phenomenological works such as Vivian Sobchack's *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, are deeply attendant to the moving image via its encounter. Approaches such as Sobchack's also employ notions of 'attention' and 'attentiveness', and of the natural fluctuations of this attentiveness in everyday experience, that can extend to the shifting and often inconsistent encounter with the art work (Sobchack 2004).

Nonetheless, issues of attention do not dwell exclusively in the realm of the phenomenological. Well-known performance theorist Richard Schechner describes 'selective inattention' as an essential component of prolonged performances. Selective inattention builds a locus of engagement that extends beyond the confines of the 'work' itself and into the realm of multiple spectatorial encounters, both on the part of the audience and the performers. Furthermore, cycles of attention and inattention invoke a kind of selective discipline of engagement and presence to the space of the performance or the art encounter (Schechner 1998: 210-34). Naturally, attention, and distraction or inattention, assume a shared space between the artwork and the body encountering it, and, to a certain degree, a shared time. While a phenomenologically 'thick' description of the encounter is highly attentive, on the one hand, to the actual and the physical, and on the other, to the virtual, experiential or affective, contours of the art work and its audiences, such description is also dependent upon the embodied presence of a body through which that encounter can play out, and the temporal co-presence of that body with the art work. This ephemeral, but prolonged and embodied encounter is in some senses at the heart of a contemporary phenomenological approach to moving image media, but also contains

within it a paradox. How can an encounter with an ephemeral, disappearing work also be the grounds for sustained critical writing?

In 'Moving-Picture Media and Modernity: Taking Intermediate and Ephemeral Forms Seriously', film historian Ian Christie makes a plea for the necessity of regarding 'ephemeral' media as a constituent element of moving image culture, both at the cusp of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and today. He argues that 'ephemeral media' do not contribute to a teleology of the emergence of modernity, or indeed of the cinema, but rather, they have always operated in concert with a range of other kinds of moving images. Furthermore, the phenomenon of what Christie describes as the 'splintering' of cinema as a technological form of moving image delivery suggests an analogy between the contemporary development of cinematic and moving image practices and that surrounding the early days of cinema (Christie 2009: 312).

Christie's approach suggests that debate around ephemeral media is not exclusive to the domain of early cinema and 19<sup>th</sup> century forms of the moving image. Contemporary practices, including installation, also participate in the heterogeneous diversity of the moving image, but in a context where this ephemerality makes a crucial contribution to complex networks of cultural practice and thought. Phenomenological approaches present a means of attending to this ephemerality, and of disrupting presumed narratives of cinematic development, even where the art work has a concrete presence only intermittently.

Phenomenology and ephemerality are not simply linked via the disruption of a teleological development of the cinema, but also in terms of the ways in which ephemeral works can be attended to in a scholarly manner. Some of the recent projects of the *Institut de Recherche et d'Innovation* (IRI), directed by Bernard Stiegler within the Centre Pompidou, are directed towards what are alternately

described on IRI's website as 'écologies', 'économies' or 'pathologies de l'attention' (IRI 2010). These moves at the heart of contemporary cultural production in France indicate that the turn towards a phenomenological approach, an approach situated in the encounter with the artwork, and not the textual or contextual frameworks of the artwork, is not a subsidiary or idiosyncratic sidestep away from more well-established modes of scholarly criticism of the artwork. On the contrary, phenomenological approaches to ephemeral moving image media are in themselves productively informing the reception, encounter and cultural milieu of the art work in institutions as prestigious as the Centre Pompidou, a major player in contemporary art conservation in France.

### **Akerman, against narrative-building**

This situating narrative for the emergence of phenomenological approaches in contemporary discourse on moving image media, turns now to the work of Akerman, and more particularly a series of ephemeral events surrounding her exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in 2004. The exhibition was discussed in the contemporaneous art press as a somewhat idiosyncratic retrospective-come-self-portrait, a 'vast audio-visual stream of consciousness' (Rosen 2004). Similarly, when Akerman was interviewed in the contemporary popular culture magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* in 2004, the article sidelined and separated the exhibition from its discussions of Akerman's filmmaking. In spite of its concurrent publication with the opening of the Pompidou exhibition, the article referred instead to the entire exhibition as a 'rétrospective' rather than a collection of moving image installations, photographs, symposia and film screenings, alongside Akerman's film, *Demain on déménage* (2004) which was released for distribution at approximately the same time (Lalanne 2004).

2004 was also the year that Chantal Akerman was awarded the Fellini medal by UNESCO 'in recognition of [her] contribution to the respect and promotion of cultural diversity' (UNESCOPRESS, 2004). Several of her newer moving image works were also exhibited elsewhere in Paris, at the private Marian Goodman Gallery, who represent her commercially (Orléan, 2004). Yet the popular French conception of Akerman's work resided firmly within the arena of filmmaking, and resolutely outside the space of the installation. In effect, the 2004 installations, exhibitions, retrospective and release of Akerman's works represent a moment of canon-building on the part of critics. What little writing that does refer to the installations and exhibitions, tends to subsume them to the larger theoretical tropes of filmmaking, particularly auteurist, feminist and experimental filmmaking, and of what Rosen describes in her interview with Akerman in *Artforum* as a shift of Akerman's work from the marginal and the exilic to a primary focus of contemporary film art (Rosen 2004). The kinds of teleological narrative building of Christie's argument are also at work when established filmmakers like Akerman produce installations. In terms of the public and critical reception of the works, the installation is put to the service of film or cinema, without acknowledgement of the particular sensitivities, spatial diversities or affective possibilities of installation.

As an alternative to the canonising homogeneities of popular discourse, a phenomenological perspective on installations, and the relation of attention to inattention, draws different conclusions. A perspective which de-privileges teleological narratives of film history, or of auteurism, is also a case for taking the ephemerality of the installation seriously. Attending to ephemerality via phenomenological engagement disrupts the normative narratives of the rise and demise of cinema, and of co-opting marginal or resistant moving image practices to

auteurism. Homogeneous and dominant cinematic narratives are revealed to be discourses, not definitive accounts.

Disruptions of narrative are also a feature that permeates much of Akerman's work, and yet as Maria Walsh points out in her article in *Screen Journal*, *Intervals of Inner Flight: Chantal Akerman's News from Home*, much criticism on Akerman's films has tended towards a narrativisation of dominant theoretical modes perceived to run through her films, which she describes as 'narrativizable identification' and 'autobiographical impulses' (Walsh 2004: 191). Such autobiographical impulses, however, are often inextricably entwined with valid questions of agency, authorship and auteurism. Scholarship on Akerman often justifiably employs biographical detail as a launch point from which it becomes possible to analyse the works closely and thematically across the duration of their exhibition. Beyond the particular cinematic temporality of duration, biographical detail can provide an enduring engagement with the nature of resistant works by auteurist filmmakers. Ivone Margulies and Marion Schmid's prominent works, for example, interrogate the biographical frontiers, formal logic and identity politics of Akerman's films (cf. Margulies 1996, Schmid 2010). Canonical narrative or an ethics of identity are not solely at stake here, but also an attention to the distinctive relationship of filmmaker to film. Nonetheless, if one shifts the grounds of the film medium towards an ephemeral, non-linear, spatially elaborate mode of the moving image, such as an installation, then the grounds upon which the 'autobiographical impulse' is laid, become rather more complex.

In a move away from the impulse of contextualisation then, reading 'against the grain' of many of the thematic preoccupations of Akerman's works, I want to attend to the installation, *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide*. Initially part of the collection of cinematic events in 2004 in Paris, the installation has since been

exhibited in Tel Aviv, and in London, at the Camden Arts Centre in 2008, where I viewed it. Via other spaces of exhibition, *Marcher à côté de ses lacets* has broken away from canonising narratives and entered into a different sphere of engagement. While it contains gestural elements of Akerman's feature film *Demain on déménage* released at around the same time, it is not simply a reconstruction or deconstruction of them. The installation exceeds the visual strategies of purely cinematic mise-en-scène, drawing upon modes of plastic and video arts. Both film and installation contain a scene of matrilineal bonding around a kitchen table, focussed through the reading of a diary entry, but while *Demain on déménage* is ultimately a burlesque film work of fiction, the thematic concerns of *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide* are far more personal.

Part of a number of other moving image installation, the installation formed two rooms. One room contained two large, rigid, concave and convex tulle screens, about 3 metres high (Figure 1) separated from one another, but set at such an angle that from some perspectives they might be seen to form part of one continuous spiral. Upon these tall screens, a concealed revolving projector screened an illuminated white background, against which sections of word-processed French text revolved, rising towards and away from the spectator, sometimes overlapping, and sometimes dissolving in their spiral movement. Radically different to the text of a book, this revolving text produced the effect of a shifting, spiralling wall of words across and around both screens.

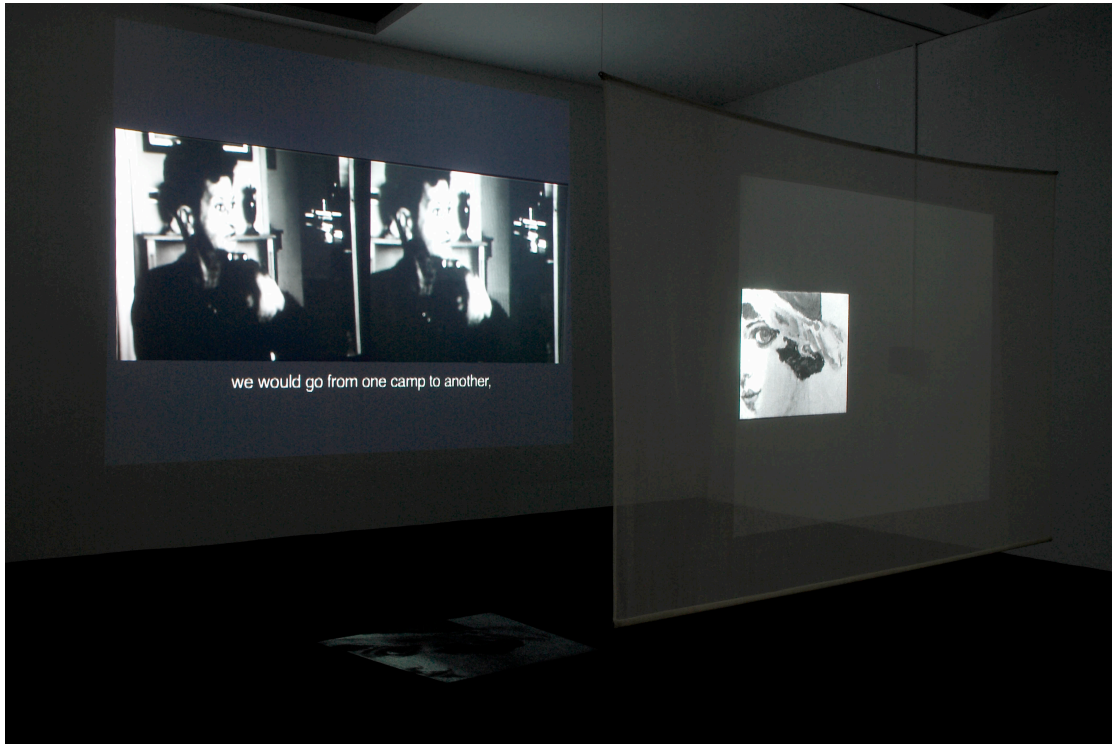
The spatial layout of the two rooms permitted entry from this first room, or alternatively from the second room via another installation, *Femmes d'Anvers en novembre* (2008). Consequently, the installation necessitated no narrative of 'before or after', or of sequentiality, in order to experience it. The large, white screens, folded

in on themselves, allowing the spectator to move with the shifting projected text, rather than to remain statically positioned in front of it. Movement around the spiral screen also permits a 'reading' of the screen – to chase after sections of text using a whole body, not just the eyes. The screens could also be regarded inattentively, as the words passed around and across the spectator's body and between the screens.



*Figure 1 Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide (Chantal Akerman, 2004)*

Image courtesy of Camden Arts Centre, 2008. Photographer: Andy Keate



*Figure 2. Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide (Chantal Akerman, 2004)*

Image courtesy of Camden Arts Centre, 2008. Photographer: Andy Keate

In the adjoining room, a large screen hung vertically in the centre (Figure 2), with looped extracts of an interview between Akerman and her mother projected onto it in double split screen format, one image blurred, the other in focus. In front of this, a semi-transparent tulle screen was hung in alignment, on to which were projected still shots of a diary and other artefacts and illustrations of handwritten text. This front screen had no diegetic sound associated with it, while from the rear the voices of Akerman and her mother, and the crackle of page-turning filled the darkened room. The contrast of the shadowlessly illuminated first room of spiral texts, and the more auditorium-like darkness of the second room of double projections, set the two spaces apart. Yet, the infiltration of light into the dark space, and of sound into the silent space, set up a sensory relationship between the two. Inattention in one room draws



attention to the features of the other, producing a performative space of negotiation between the work and the spatial encounter with it.

Just as one space contaminates the other, the ebb and flow of attention and inattention also draw the spectator between the two spaces, a back and forth motion that translates the speech of the filmed extract into the text on the spiral screen and back again. The words of Akerman's mother recur in Akerman's voice (her mother barely speaks in the filmed footage) on the hanging transparent screen in the second room, and spiralling around the curved illuminated screens of the first room. Black text is overlaid with white screen; black screen is overlaid with white page. In the moment of the encounter with the work is situated a complex explosion of sense-making, initiating a transformative affective encounter with words that exceed their linguistic structures as diary entries, or their screen presence. The installation, neither a tributary of cinema nor its linear descendant, claims the ephemerality of its moving images as a moment in which cinematic conventions of space, narrative and interpretation can be disrupted in favour of performative experience. Ephemerality, the passing of objects from one spatial, affective, or experiential mode to another, and the accompanying structures of attention and inattention in this encounter, work in concert with, and not in contradistinction to phenomenological approaches to contemporary moving image media.

Jacques Rancière, in his essay 'The Intolerable Image' describes affective conditions of attention and curiosity as 'affects that blur the false obviousness of strategic schemata [...] Their tension also points towards a different politics of the sensible - a politics based on the variation of distance, the resistance of the visible and the uncertainty of effects.' (Rancière 2009: 105). Following Rancière's lines, by attending to ephemerality and inattention, resistance to visual strategies and openness

to inattentive uncertainty, the encounter with works such as Akerman's reveal these disruptions: of teleologies of film history and of underpinning interpretative narratives.

The work's ephemerality argues compellingly for a phenomenologically informed approach, and this phenomenological attentiveness to ephemerality in turn troubles and complexifies the standard schemas of narrative and political-visual strategies of the moving image. Even after *Marcher à côté des ses lacets* has disappeared from view, outside the exhibition space and time, phenomenologies of the ephemeral put forward a productive means of establishing evolving and resistant discourses as an alternative to the prevailing notion of either an eternal or dying cinematic image. Ultimately, attending to ephemerality also attends to the textured, nuanced performance of moving image media, and to the thresholds of attention and inattention that bind spectator, screen, image, and space together in the phenomenon of the moving image encounter.

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*Demain on déménage*. Dir. Chantal Akerman. Gemini Films/Paradise Films, 2004.  
DVD

*Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide/ To Walk Beside One's Shoelaces in an Empty Fridge* (installation, 2004)

Two room installation: first room contains spiral tulle screens with two revolving video projections; second room contains split-screen looped video projection on tulle screen (22mins, black and white) and still image video projection on tulle screen (black and white), one soundtrack to accompany looped video.

*Femmes d'Anvers en novembre* (installation, 2008)

Two projection looped video installation (Quicktime and HD) (20 mins), black and white

### **Short biography**

Jenny Chamarette is Lecturer in Film Studies at Queen Mary, University of London. She is the author of *Phenomenology and the Future of Film: Rethinking Subjectivity beyond French Cinema* (Palgrave Macmillan: 2012) and co-editor of *Guilt and Shame: Essays in French Literature, Thought and Visual Culture* (Peter Lang: 2009). She has published on intermediality, affect, embodiment and phenomenology in film, photography and installation art in France, Europe, the Middle East and North

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**Keywords:** Chantal Akerman, installation art, ephemerality, phenomenology, moving images

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<sup>i</sup> Belonging to an earlier iteration of existential phenomenology, Husserlian 'bracketing' is beyond the scope of this article.