

# ARTFORUM

May 7, 2013

## Mother Nature

By Amy Taubin



View of “Chantal Akerman: *Maniac Shadows*,” 2013. Photo: Jason Mandella.

*“And here or elsewhere, I don’t have a life. I didn’t know how to make one. All I’ve ever done is leave and come back.”* – Chantal Akerman, *My Mother Laughs*

HEARTBREAKING AND DISTANCED, straightforward and oblique, *Maniac Shadows*, an autobiographical sound and image installation by Chantal Akerman, is impelled, like all of the artist’s films and gallery work, by the most primal relationship: the mother/child dyad. Most viewers of Akerman’s landmark film, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), think of the titular character as a part-time whore, but I’m sure that to herself and to Akerman she was, first of all, a mother.

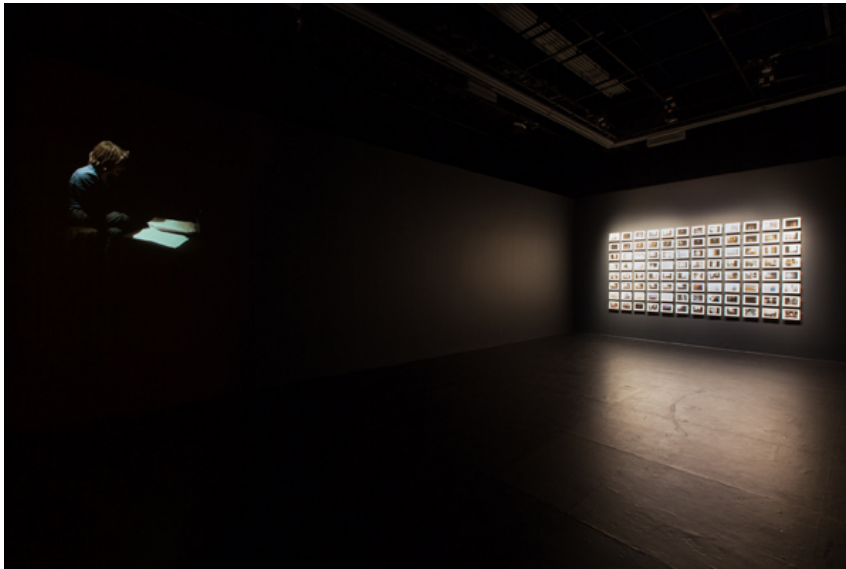
In 1995, Akerman showed her first video installation, *D’Est*, a travelogue about Eastern Europeans displaced from their way of life after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The daughter of Holocaust survivors, Akerman finds diasporas everywhere. *A Family in Brussels* (2001)—a text about her mother, Nelly Akerman, dealing with the death of her husband—was initially presented in the US as a staged reading and subsequently published by Dia Art Foundation as a book and a CD. What’s most remarkable about the text are Akerman’s fluid shifts between speaking in the first person as herself and as her mother. Her great *To Walk Next to One’s Shoelaces in an Empty Fridge* (2004) contains the Rosetta Stone for all her work, a diary written by her maternal grandmother, who was murdered in Auschwitz. The diary was found after the war by Nelly, who showed it to Chantal and her sister. Mother and daughters wrote their own messages of love in the

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diary, an object that links three generations of women. Everything in the installation is either behind or projected onto gossamer veils, and yet it is Akerman's most nakedly personal work, containing, in addition to the diary, another glimmer of hope that the fraught mother/daughter dyad can be positively resolved: a double-screen projection of Akerman "interviewing" her mother, which concludes with Nelly embracing her daughter, saying, "My dear girl, I am so glad I lived to see this day."

Such resolution is no longer possible in *Maniac Shadows*. Occupying two rooms of The Kitchen's second-floor gallery, the installation generates signature Akerman tensions: between here and there, presence and absence, exterior and interior. In the room we first enter (the exterior), we are confronted by a triptych of video projections spread across a long wall. They depict, in relatively short fragments, some of the places where Akerman has taken up residence during her peripatetic life. There are New York street scenes and the Tel Aviv apartment where she made her diaristic video *Là-Bas* (2006), with its wall of windows covered with blinds that diffuse the sunlight and act as an imperfect barrier against the dangers of the outside world—a way of observing without being observed. There's a beautifully furnished living room where Nelly can be seen, a tiny figure on a blue settee; a kitchen and a bedroom that might be part of Nelly's apartment; a hallway in Akerman's apartment, but who knows in which city; a close-up of a TV screen where Obama's 2008 election is being celebrated; and quite a few more. And there are the images that give the installation its name: Akerman's shadow, sometimes alone, sometimes shoulder-to-shoulder with the shadow of a taller woman, cast on the sand or on the water—an ephemeral index testifying that once upon a time someone was here. Or there. Certain of the images, including those of the shadows, are simultaneously projected, slightly dim and out of focus, on the side walls. The doubling produces the disorienting sensation of being able to see an entire image with both frontal and peripheral vision.



View of "Chantal Akerman: *Maniac Shadows*," 2013. Photo: Jason Mandella.

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The sync sound from the three video projections mix with one another and also with the sound of Akerman's voice reading the opening chapter of a long text titled *My Mother Laughs*. If one follows the voice into the second (interior) room, one sees projected at the extreme left of the back wall a video of Akerman seated at a table reading aloud from a pile of loose pages. The text is the crux of the matter, and yet we only see Akerman from the side as she reads. She is not speaking to us, but she allows us to overhear her words. At the other end of the room, a wall is covered with a grid of ninety-six unframed still photos, many of them shot in the same places as the videos in the exterior room but here frozen in time. Looking at the photos, we become even more aware of the text that Akerman is reading. The room is dark, the walls painted black. This is the space of the psyche, of subjectivity. In here, the sounds from the videos in the outer room seem far off, as if outside those ubiquitous windows in Akerman's movies.

The evening before the installation opened, Akerman gave an extended reading of the text from which the video reading is excerpted. She stopped after about ninety minutes, having read only the first quarter of the text, which she described privately as "a monster" and "circular, like a womb." The reading was an uncomfortable experience. Akerman voice was hoarse from exhaustion and cigarettes. She was angered by the sounds of the latecomers, clanking up the stairs to the top of the audience risers to find seats, and even more angered by people clanking down the stairs to leave while she was still reading. (The Kitchen needs to do something about that entrance. In the old configuration of the space, there were back stairs leading to the top of the risers, which made comings and goings less conspicuous.) But what made the reading so profoundly painful is the separation anxiety that motors the text.

Akerman knows that her mother does not have long to live. She was not expected to survive a recent hospital stay but she did and, for the moment, she is at home and surprisingly strong. In the text, Akerman describes in detail her mother's current medical condition and behavior—what she says, what she eats, how her relationship to her daughter may or may not be different—as if to write this down and read it aloud could forestall the inevitable end and also act as a memento mori after the inevitable happens. This is not an unusual practice. But Akerman also assesses her own situation in relation to the impending breach in the symbiosis between daughter and mother. She sees herself as "an old child" who has defined herself by repeatedly running away from her mother's house and returning to it from all the far-flung places where she made the great work referenced in the installation—as if those works were elaborations on the child's game of "fort-da" described in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. What will she become when there is no place to which she can return? That is the implicit question in the text and in the installation. The only thing that matters, she says, is "Life or not."

*Chantal Akerman's Maniac Shadows runs through Saturday, May 11th at The Kitchen.*

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