

Amy Taubin, 'Man with a Camera', Artforum, November 2010

ARTFORUM

FILM

Man with a Camera

AMY TAUBIN ON MICHEL AUDER

I FIRST ENCOUNTERED Michel Auder's video work in the early 1980s. The tape that left an indelible impression depicted Auder's daughter Alexandra at age five or thereabouts watching a video of her own birth. Auder was not the first artist to record moving images of his wife giving birth; that honor almost certainly goes to Stan Brakhage. Unlike Brakhage, however, Auder did not set out to make the home movie into a high-art form. He did not mull for months, as Brakhage did, over the problem of "aesthetic distance" and whether it would evaporate if he showed explicit images of the birth process. (It was specifically the image of the afterbirth in *Window Water Baby Moving* [1959] that troubled Brakhage.) Auder simply found the most informative angles for his video camera—one shot was indeed of the placenta being expelled. Another was a head-on view between the bent legs of his wife Viva, revealing the baby crowning in her vagina, part of the sequence that Alexandra was watching when her father videotaped her years later. What makes Auder an extremely interesting moving-image maker—one who intuited almost immediately that the inevitable ubiquity of video cameras would transform social relations and individual psyches—is not that he thought to shoot his daughter's birth and to use the footage in one of the many diaristic videos he has produced over the past forty years. No, it's that he would consider *reusing* that footage, redefining it in terms of who is looking at it. One has to think about what it means for a child to

Much like Jonas Mekas's film diaries, Michel Auder's videos constitute a history of the underground and downtown art world, but Auder's predilections took him into a not unrelated sex-and-drugs demimonde where Mekas never ventured.

witness her own birth on a TV screen—what divisions between public and private, clarity and obscurity, known and unknown, parent and child, were breached at the moment in which that follow-up, but by no means secondary, video-within-a-video image was recorded.

Born in the small French town of Soissons in 1944, Auder began his career as a fashion photographer in Paris, worked with the experimental Zanzibar film

group, and met and fell in love with Viva when she and actor Louis Waldon came to Paris in 1969, the two of them notorious for their hard-core coupling in Andy Warhol's *Blue Movie* (1968), the sweetest, most touching movie Warhol ever made. Auder shot a film (using both 16 mm and 35 mm) with Viva and Waldon titled *Keeping Busy* (1969), which, like his earlier work on film, is probably mostly lost. He then followed Viva to New York and moved in with her at the Chelsea Hotel, where he met the experimental narrative filmmaker Shirley Clarke. That same year, he and Clarke bought a Sony Porta-Pak, the first widely marketed consumer-grade video recorder—the legendary, heavy, clumsy, analog progenitor of today's HD models.

Among the most significant aspects of Auder's extensive body of work (reflected in his current retrospective at Lunds Konsthall in Sweden and in a three-gallery minisurvey in New York this past spring at Zach Feuer, Newman Popiashvili, and Participant Inc) is that it encompasses the entire history of the branch of video technology that was intended for use outside the network-television industry. One room of the small Bushwick studio where Auder has worked for the past eleven years is crammed with outdated hardware: Porta-Pak, three-quarter-inch Numatic, Betamax, Video8, Hi8. Auder keeps the stuff around not just for sentimental reasons but because he needs it to look at work he has not yet upgraded to digital. Early in the decade, he digitized four thousand hours of video, loaded it onto hard drives, and installed Final Cut on his computer. Auder says that for several years he hardly shot any new video, spending most of his time working with what was already "inside." When he again turned his eye to the outside world, it was mostly through mobile-phone cameras.

The combination of precise, sophisticated editing technology and low-end cameras has yielded a twenty-two-minute piece unlike any of Auder's work I've seen before. Titled *Narcolepsy* (2010) and shown in New



Michel Auder, *Narcolepsy*, 2010, stills from a color video, 22 minutes 48 seconds.

York at Newman Popiashvili (Auder used some of the same footage in his installation *Dinner Is Served* at Krabbesholm Højskole, Skive, Denmark, earlier this year), the video revolves figuratively if not quite literally around the image of a young woman, fast asleep, sitting upright on what might be a restaurant banquette. The piece is made up of multiple layers of superimposed imagery and twelve layered tracks of sound. The low-res picture recalls Super 8 film, but the colors are softer without appearing washed-out. The texture of the image, particularly in the close-ups of the woman's face, evokes the cracked, varnished surfaces of old-master paintings. Superimposition was used extensively by avant-garde filmmakers in the '50s and '60s, sometimes to economize (it was cheaper to roll back the film in the camera and record two or three times on a single