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## The Thoroughly Documented, Marginally Fictional Life of Michel Auder, Artist

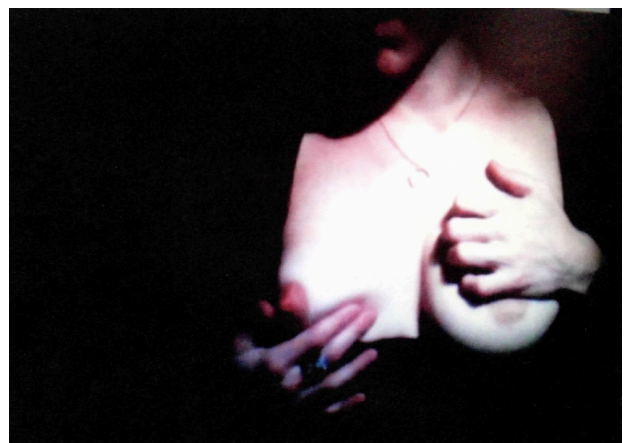
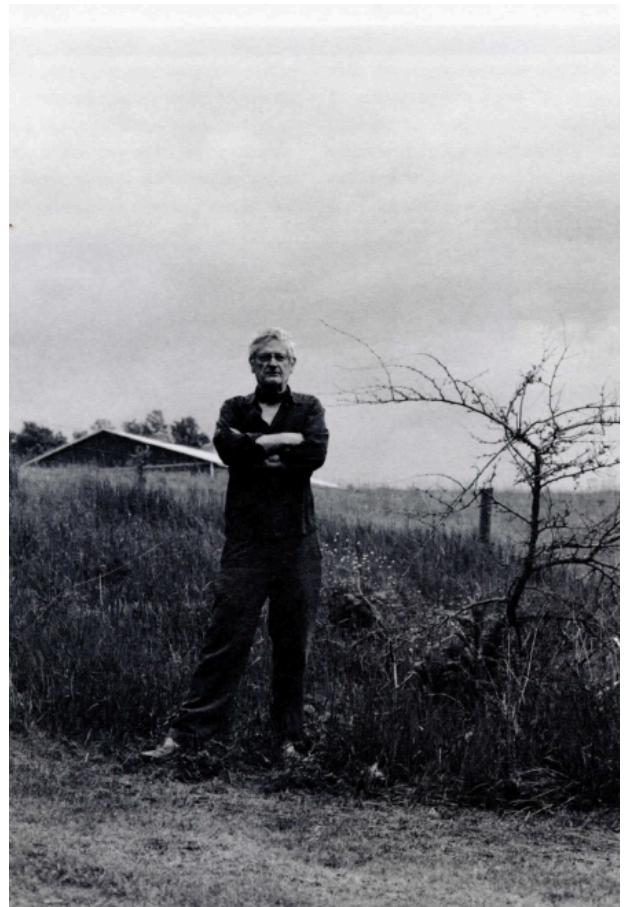
-Andrew Berardini

Michel Auder is certainly not the first one to have re-edited his life for the sake of art, but his is one of the grandest of such projects to be sure.

Minute-to-minute, hour-to-hour, real life can be sort of boring. Even in sleep, a cavalcade of mostly mundane thoughts shove and persistently prattle, filling the snaking space of silence, occupying the gaps between the traffic and radio, elevator music and small-talk. Prayers and worries, petty envies and quiet castigations, the tongue-bitten complaints and heart crumpling concerns, hopes, loves, obsessions, lusts (Ages 13-22, approximately, you had a dim pornographic movie tinkling always softly in the background of your mind at all times) all scrape against each other in the long hours. Yes, you have a few regrets. The word "regret" floats through you like an autumn leaf, back-and-forth in gentle arcs, down and away. But one thing leads to another. Real time is unsettling from the outside.

Can you play it all back? On the screen of your blinkered eyelids, all the mornings, evenings, afternoons, all the quotidian and extraordinary, triumphs and transgressions that occurs in a life? Even perhaps, to re-order the events in your head, isolate one kind or another? Does it all come through like a distant transmission from a planet we travelled to long ago and to which we never wish to return? Or is it like we are living it now? The memory more real than the present; so transporting, we can now smell the invisible lilacs of decades past, more freshly floral and painfully pungent than real lilacs could ever be.

Your life as you look at it, and this may be stating the obvious, isn't what actually happened to you but really how you remember it, the subtle edits you do from moment-to-moment. People have always been retelling their slanted tales, history is proverbially written by the winners, but what about our own stories? In the most literal sense, Michel Auder is as much an historian as an artist. He is his own recording angel, both seeing himself and seeing from himself, the camera almost always handy over four decades of activity. The shots are of him, of his lovers, of his bad behavior, moments of grace, intense gruesome beauty, casual affairs, long stares out of windows, lots of drugs, sex, and varieties of self-abuse, arguments, portraits of working artists, performers and occasional porn stars, more sex, vacations, torsos, cigarettes, boredom, sunsets. There is the stream of life, the fiction of the everyday extended, shot with intimacy,



languor, emotionally exposed, the material degrading with the strange nostalgia of a home movie, edited, always edited.

Each life curiously is filled with a collection of moments that strung together carefully could reveal the profound depth and power of each individual existence. Tragedies and farce, rhythms and joys, terrors and braveries. But not everyone has, out of art or ego, revealed their lives for our perusal so nakedly or as oddly and compellingly as Auder, both subject and author.

Auder's career took a fortuitous turn when he purchased his first portable video-camera (incidentally, the Sony Portapak, which was the first portable video camera). With that, he let the camera roll on what seems an extraordinary life and by many measures it is. The litany of Auder's allies and collaborators, subjects and lovers over the years do prove him to be a nexus for a lot of curious social and artistic changes that were going on around him, from his since disappeared footage of the May '68 riots in Paris to documenting Warhol to drug misadventures with actor/author Eric Bogosian and his long relationships to Warhol Superstar Viva and artist Cindy Sherman, as well as personal portraits of friends including Alice Neel and Annie Sprinkle.

These friends and collaborators are important aspect of his work. But more than his milieu, Auder has documented over 5,000 hours of raw footage of his life, his interests, his observation; and even more importantly to his artwork is his ability to endless reedit all that footage. The friends and lovers, the situations and historical moments are all just conditions, context, material. Auder transforms from documentarian to artist when he begins to edit it all, shuffle it around, concentrate as much on things seen as the eye seeing it.

Because the documentation of his life and the things he's seen around him are the material for his work, I find it hard to separate the two. I think he may even find it hard sometimes to separate the two.

In the trailer for the film of his life he made with collaborator Andrew Neel called *The Feature*, 2008, framed by flowers with a rash of bananas lying on the table in front of him, Auder waxes philosophic on his life's work:

"If you wake five thousand or so video hours and deduct what my life has been it could be made in so many different ways and in so many different takes. I could come out like a total asshole, like a monster, like a great poet. [...] My life is based on my video works. I was attracted to making movies out of what was already around me. The idea of making film constantly out of whatever was around me. I don't need actors, I don't need sets. I'll take the sets and the actors from what's around me."

Piece by piece, a view through a chink in the edited hours, looking at Auder's work is to look at his life, thoroughly documented and marginally fictionalized.

Does one arrange by the chronology of the event or the chronology of his edit of them?

For *Chelsea Girls* with Andy Warhol, 1971-1976, the 88-minute video may have been shot in the '70s but Auder left it unedited until 1994. Here we have Auder observing and learning from Warhol, the





deadpan and the nonchalant, the simple genius/stupidity of just running the camera on and letting it go possibly unattended for hours ("Q: So all pictures are good that come from a camera? Warhol: Yes."), the center of a social machine that burnished his reputation and from whose talent he was constantly drawing. The mundane can become heroic with repetition and time, simply capturing one's era without too much fuss has its own weird charm. Warhol comes off here as always as a kind of empty vessel. Post-shooting his reputation waned and waxed, while this footage sat stuffed in a shelf or in a box somewhere for around twenty years while Auder chased other dragons.

Like the one he pursued with Eric Bogosian for his 43-minute video, *Chasing the Dragon* (an old Chinese metaphor for opium use), which more or less follows Bogosian bumbling around getting high, his sense of story bleeding between the fictive and the real, which has been known to happen with heroin and has been known to happen with Auder. Made from 1971 to 1987, one can easily imagine Auder over the sixteen years just not being done, distracted with something else, constantly tweaking his footage, finally letting it go into the world and perhaps not even then letting it be done.

The concentration isn't always on Auder as a life, but of course the weird things he sees. In 1984, Auder shot a number of Olympic events off television during the event's sojourn in Los Angeles. Like a good swathe of Auder's work, even the Olympics become salacious. Of course, the games are always about bodies, there's no denying that, but Auder makes a special effort in this 25-minute video to concentrate on the crotches of athletes, the folds and bulges, tightly ensconced in synthetics and cotton, spread eagled and arced in fantastic configurations. You may too perhaps glance at the athlete's parts, briefly, tastefully, trying not to appear as too concupiscent or sleazy for that matter. This work is about the second level of mediation, we're watching television, television's choices of what it's showing us in this nationalist relic of extreme physical feats. Maybe Auder is critiquing tv's reduction of humans to bodies, maybe he's just turned on, perhaps both really. The lust of it, the weird joke on the Olympics as a couchsport for most, still locate the work within Auder and his desires, his body.

In both *Voyage to the Center of the Phone Lines*, 1993, and his more recent work, *Untitled (I was looking back to see if you were looking back at me to see me looking back at you)*, 2012, Auder finds himself peering into other's lives without their permission. In the first case by tapping cell phone conversations and in the second by peeping out his window into other's apartments left open to view. The intimacy of the phone conversations in the first is bracing. They'd be off-puttingly intimate if it didn't bring out the voyeur in me. I find myself feeling guilty, even as a procession of sunsets and nature shots complement these often furtive conversations. A part of me does wonder if these are real exchanges. They must be. But then again, does it matter? Do we depend on its documentary fact for it to fully work? In the latter video, Auder is shooting circumstances it would be difficult to fake, and often he's implicated in our watching him watching them: his reflection in the window glass (as well as what appears to be his granddaughter), the sounds of tvs maundering in the background. The acts we witness together are both sexy and mundane. Why is it always more lonely to watch people eat by themselves, always more so if they do while watching television? Why are we so curious how others move, fight, fuck when we're sure that they think no one is watching?



Auder seems to be breaking some social codes here in regards to privacy, are we too implicated always in our voyeurism, both here but always in Auder's work. Are we cleared because, at least in the case of his own life, we are invited to watch?

In Auder's short video, perhaps one of his best, *My Last Bag of Heroin (For Real)*, 1986, you know he's full of shit. I mean, you hope he's not for his own sake, but this film depicts Auder at perhaps his lowest, a junkie desperate to stop being a junkie. Auder the actor reveals himself to not necessarily be a trustworthy narrator. The general rule of "Don't trust junkies" is of course always evocable, but it's a point of puncture for the tableau of his oeuvre, a moment of reveal that we should regard everything not as documentary but as art, with the rules of concept and aesthetic overriding fact. It's just that the fiction he's constructing is from an archive that once, on some level, reflected reality.

Like much of Auder's work, the archive is so big that the artist's work of documenting and re-editing will only be done when he is too. Five thousand hours if he's telling the truth is over two hundred solid days of footage, it's value is less the sheer length of it, but the time Auder has to rearrange and re-edit it. It's value as art is in this rearrangement, the archive is not without value of course, but it is Auder the human artist who animates it with his choices.

While watching Auder's oeuvre, I find myself wishing that I had a recording of every sunset I paused to watch, every lover's face dissolving into orgasm, every mistake, every noble deed, every act of cowardice and flight of poetic monologue. I wish I could see it indexed and reordered, a series of unfortunate events and a building of glories, each a different edit of the same small existence. A life seen only through passenger windows of cars, the acres of book pages, the years of screens. To reorder it, to make it make sense, to document is not cement fact, but to enliven imagination, to return us back to wherever that was. A madeleine perhaps.

I don't know if I could handle my collective cruelty, the careful documentation of me at my weakest, most fearful, the abyssal plunges. Would I be brave enough as an artist to expose what a selfish prick I've been in life? Or would I only reveal the moments of self-aggrandizement, of profound generosity and hard-fought bravery? Setting aside the day-to-day rhythm, the form of fact, would I be brave enough to reveal the truth?

In this light, I feel lucky Auder has gone there and beyond for me.

