

The Highlights - Michel Auder: The Feature

Still from Michel Auder, *The Feature*

Years ago I watched a videotape of Michel Auder and the ex-Warhol actor Louis Waldon lolling around a kitchen in a tony Los Angeles bungalow. There was some pleasure in seeing the luxury of this lifestyle (it was a house-sit - neither Auder or Waldon owned the place), to see celebrity behind the scenes (and for Waldon, past his glory days). Then I got bored, my attention waned, and everything seemed irritating and self-indulgent. But still it went on. And on. And eventually, I was mesmerized. They entertained the housekeeper and a cab driver Auder had met on the way in from LAX. They ate off fruit plates, flirted with one another, gossiped, reminisced, drank cocktails, and went for leisurely swims in a rock-cut pool down the path. It went on forever. Nothing truly dramatic happened, but the experience of being with these people for those (three?) hours as they cracked lame jokes, awkwardly flaunted their bodies, muttered, and became bored with one another - it was so likely and believable that even though it was clear at the outset everything was unscripted, the slow burn of this truthfulness eventually ingratiated me completely.

Michel Auder has documented his life in this way for over forty-five years. Intimate and relentless, these long-duration works capture Auder and those closest to him at points of vulnerability and triumph, but most often during the long stretches of ordinary in between. His works test our compulsion to read allegory into imagery or make meaningful the isolated, emphasized things on screen, to redeem banality. If art is about distilling or formalizing experience, often after the fact, Auder is interested in experience as form itself, and he wants to record it right then. Now. All of it. For however long it goes on, no matter what (little) happens. What seems a casual recording is in fact the result of very deliberate choices; Auder's sensitivity to the way character is revealed after hours and his unflinching ability to turn the camera on the most unappealing moments give these documents the stench of truth.

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That Auder's life was and is the stuff of movies helps along this artistic formula. He was the quintessential bohemian, born in northern France in 1945. Early footage sees him on rooftops or stalking the streets with long hair flowing. He moved to New York in the '60s and was an active part of the downtown art scene: He married Viva Superstar, made work

with Eric Bogosian and others, lived in the Chelsea Hotel full time. There was a stint in Los Angeles, much travel to Morocco and South East Asia, and a long relationship with Cindy Sherman that spanned the '80s and '90s. Auder has approached video and film differently over the years - appropriating televised imagery, surveilling people at a distance, or using scanners to capture audio of strangers - but the diaristic mode is what he continues to return to; the relationships that have persisted throughout his life and his firsthand experiences form the meat of his practice.

While it is impossible to say that Auder's persona in these videos, when he films himself or is otherwise part of the filmed subject matter, is sincere or 'real,' it does not distract. He is at ease with the camera and exhibits a believable measure of self-consciousness. (Viva, a very compelling figure in much of his work from the '60s and '70s, is an actor, and her strong personality often complements Auder's more impish presence in these early films.) His recording equipment is always very present, either implied by a shaky handheld image or pictured within the frame, monitors stacked and wires leading off camera; Auder often holds the device as he films himself, at times looking straight into the lens. It isn't a comedic gesture; he's not addressing the viewer. It's an objective gaze that seems to be preoccupied with making sure everything is turned on. Auder does not seem to be engaged in a premeditated investigation of his 'self' in these works, but rather his affect on camera is that of a documentarian. He records the unfolding of his life without specific aims or objectives, led by an intuitive impulse. Tellingly his films always seem to be rough cuts, fragments, material that might be reconfigured in the meantime and 'finished' (whatever this means) at some point in the future.

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The most recent occasion for this reconfiguring is *The Feature* (SeeThink Productions, 2007). The title suggests a culmination of sorts, a 'main event,' and it points to the fact that this is the most self-consciously constructed project of Auder's career. Co-directed by Andrew Neel (grandson of the late Alice Neel, Auder's longtime friend and frequent subject), *The Feature* runs close to three hours and begins with the plainspoken disclaimer: "This narrative is not a true account." What unfolds is a textured meditation on the idea of autobiography, using new theatrical scenes directed by Neel and footage from the 5000-plus hours in Auder's archive, footage that at the start of the video he claims "seems to be real, and is real, and not real." Two main narrative threads intertwine throughout the video, which with its dense visual layers, synched and non-diagetic sound, works to create a kind of hallucinatory Ken Burns effect.

In the first scene of one narrative arc, "Michel Auder" (played by Auder) learns he has a

terminal illness. It is an intentionally hackneyed premise that sets the stage for a sequence of absurd scenarios that see "Auder" partaking in clichéd hedonistic and nihilistic behavior: He gorges on rich food, wanders cemeteries, fondles jewels, carries on relationships with a number of glamorous women, and deliberates about the distribution of his substantial wealth. In this narrative "Auder" is a wildly successful artist who puts off powerful gallerists to sunbathe beside an infinity pool on a hillside in Los Angeles. The action and dialogue beg believability but these scenes carry the casual tone of his diaristic work. They are shot through with a quiet intensity. Many scenes of "Auder" alone, silent and walking, or the scenes with his daughter (playing herself) and his lovers (actresses I assume?) are so tender they complicate any satirical read.

The other thread is comprised of an onslaught of fragments from his video/film archive - 16mm film transferred to pixilated video, degraded Portapak recordings, audio from police scanners. Auder is the narrator here, telling the story of his life in the third person. It ranges widely but clusters around his marriages, his daughter, addiction, and his shifting relationship to his work, creativity, and the art world.

"There is no fine line between what is film and what is not film, and it seems like he put himself in situations that become the subject of the film. And blood flows in it and becomes part of that scene. And that becomes part of his life, and as it goes along through the years and the years and the years it seems like it just happens like this sometimes." -*The Feature*

Auder narrates how his earliest works on 16mm were shown until they literally fell apart. Scratched frames were cut out, the film reconnected and projected until it would go up, as he describes, "in a puff of smoke." Archiving and cataloging his works came later, and with it a changed attitude toward making film and its role in his life. The collaborative spirit and thin divide between art and living that fed his work in the '60s and '70s splintered, and he slowly became enmeshed in what he terms the "straight" art world, a world with which he had to finally break in order to regain a sense of his creative autonomy.

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If the overt themes of *The Feature* are self-invention and the effect of memory and subjectivity on the shaping of our past, there is also the ambivalent effect of money and comfort on creativity. An early collaborative video of Auder and Larry Rivers from the '70s (featured in *The Feature*) is set at a seaside estate in the Hamptons, with Rivers playfully mock-interviewing the affluent guests at an afternoon party. It captures a sense of desire and

disdain for this life of comfort. Late in *The Feature*, the inimitable Taylor Mead performs spoken word to a thin crowd in a contemporary downtown art space. He rants about the high rents in Manhattan, how the artists who created downtown are being priced out. Soon after comes footage Auder shot in Soho of a "fucking fake artist" moving into a gigantic loft studio, an attitude complicated by the fact he is shooting from the loft he is staying in across the street. Auder's performance as the Rich and Famous Artist in *The Feature* is incongruous with the absurdity of his settings and dialogue - he gives the character, filled with ennui, too much pathos. This unevenness and the fraught relationship of art and money depicted elsewhere in the video perhaps belie an ambivalence in Auder's attitude, a tension born of being an artist who has operated for so long in the interstices of the art world, whose work is not easily categorized and understood.

At several points in *The Feature* there is footage of Auder at a piano playing restless, improvisational music. It doesn't have a clear beginning or end, and it sounds in some ways like a soundtrack, the music that is played in the background of a scene, cueing our responses and subtly altering our moods. It is, of course, like his signature mode of filmmaking: intuitive, meandering, and with no score. It is also moving, emotional, and highly charged. If the power of his work as an artist pivots on time and patience, it is also found in the deep impact he makes with its extreme intimacy and the complex gesture of fully exposing his life, a practice that only gains in significance as the years go on. In this way, *The Feature* is actually more like a trailer. There's much more where this came from.