



Figure 1. Chantal Akerman's *NOW*, at the Jewish Museum, New York, 2018. © 2018 Babette Mangolte (All Rights of Reproduction Reserved)

***NOW*, Chantal Akerman's Last Work**

Babette Mangolte

NOW is a video installation made of multiple screens placed in three layers. When you see the installation for the first time, you feel that you are focusing only on the central layer (a single screen) and that the two outer layers—each composed of two screens, to the left and right of the central screen and progressively closer to you—reveal your eyes' peripheral vision that has been made visible for you by Chantal Akerman, the filmmaker who designed this installation between January and March 2015 and installed it in Venice for the April 2015 Biennale.¹

I saw it there in July 2015 in the space where the installation premiered. But because the space was not enclosed, you could not isolate the Biennale crowd noises from the sound of *NOW*. You were aware of the obsessive sounds of motors that made you perceive that you were looking at the landscape from moving vehicles. You heard some gunshots, explosions, and loud noises that you could not identify. The clear association you got from what you heard was an allusion to guns, the sense of having to flee because of war, the need to be on the move. I knew that I was not really experienc-

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ing the immersion into the piece as it had been conceptualized by my friend Chantal, knowing how sound is a key component of her installations. They are works where actions and people are not always the driving parameters, so the context for what we see is conveyed by the offscreen sound that is of great importance in generating meaning.

The center screen is the farthest back. The four other screens are separated by the central one, but they are aligned in two layers at different distances from the center. The images on the five screens are tracking shots taken from moving cars. Everything was shot in the Negev desert—its bare vegetation, the dryness of the land, no water anywhere, and no clouds. At least that is what I assumed while in Venice.

I rediscovered the piece in February 2018 in a very contained room in the Jewish Museum in New York. Then I felt there could be exceptions to that one singular location, even one as vast as the Negev desert. The film could include elements shot in other places. But whatever you see is land that is barren of most vegetation, and the color is primarily that of sandy dirt, rocks, with white sky and some rare blue. At first you feel that the difference of the speed of each tracking shot is what distinguishes the five screens and the relation each screen has to the depth of the space. The layer closest to you (that I call layer 3, because for me, the center screen has to be layer 1, and therefore the intermediate layer has to be layer 2) always seems to have been shot from a faster car than layer 2, and it is the same for the center screen, where the tracking movement is not ever moving as fast as on layer 2 or 3. This is why the intention of exposing peripheral vision was so clear to me. The color palette of the center stage also distinctly shows more fertile land and more blue sky, some vegetation, not just rocks and gravel or sage. At a distance you perceive antenna-like satellite towers or electrical lines, so that we are in a man-made landscape after all. To the left of layer 3 you see parked cars briefly and an immobile truck that you pass by quickly. But the land behind the group of cars and the truck is the same as on the road before, with the same colored sand and dirt.

What you see is movement. I could notice only two exceptions, when there is a brief stop on an extreme close-up of a rocky wall, as if those rocks were blocking the road. Suddenly there is a jump cut, and we are back on the road. The two stops are actually the same image, but reversed, and you notice that there are multiple repetitions of tracking shots at every speed. You see the same footage used in a different order, so it is difficult to measure the duration of the various visual loops on the three layers of screens. Some tracking shots are too fast to be more than streaks of light indicating the sky and sandy terrain. Those are so distinctive that you know when they are repeated with their composition reversed. At first you think that each layer (that is, the left and right screens in layers 2 and 3) is contiguous in projecting the same movement from left to right or right to left. But that is not necessarily the case. The more you look, the more you discover that the movement jumps from layer 2 left to layer 3 right, continuing the movement initiated on layer 2 that is more distant than layer 3, which is the closest to the spectator. This shift of distance adds a complexity to the way the space is represented that is uncanny.

If you go behind the screens, you will find a small TV display with the little vignette in the back, with colored neon tubes that are pink on one side and blue on the other—both colors that are absent from the images projected on the screen. You do not feel that the installation encourages you to wander throughout the whole space, because it is too tight. So you stay put, transfixed in the center of the five screens, looking at the roads passing by, totally subjugated to the constant movement and aggressively loud sounds. The soundtrack is so packed with sound effects and an intense presence of people that the visuals of what appears to be a desert disappear behind the animation of the sounds, which evoke people talking and singing, church bells, a police siren passing by, a Muslim call to prayers, as well as musical fragments—even a solo played by a cellist in a concert that is almost buried under the soundtrack's cacophony of violence. The image is all about movement, but the predominance of the sounds of people transforms what you see and negates the empty landscape. Sounds from

crowds of people in cities are mixed with the sounds of motor vehicles while the image shows a deserted landscape. The noises are from urban areas: police sirens, sounds of the subway, and crowds of people. When you hear people talking in Hebrew, English, Arabic, French, Hindi, or other languages, you feel that the movement you see is not part of what you hear. You become aware of two or three gunshots from a single revolver, and later rapid machine gun fire, and suddenly you—the viewer-listener—put together the sound you hear with what you see, and you decode a state of war in faraway places, as well as here in the cities we live in, and elsewhere, where the others live.

After a while, we feel that the five film projections become blurry, because we stop looking. Our attention becomes totally centered on listening to the enormous complexity of the sound and how evocative it is. It generates a rapid burst of associations that provoke zillions of impressions, evoking the extreme diversity of the places the sound is coming from. The sound is heavily mixed and distorted with echoes and decrepit public announcement speaker systems, which evoke the bad acoustics of the New York subway system and its train noises, and buses in Brussels or Paris or elsewhere. I remember that Chantal lived in both Paris and New York during the last three years of her life: all the sounds of her everyday life are there in *NOW*.

I contacted Claire Atherton, a close friend of Chantal's who edited many of her works starting in 1986. She sent me a description about making the film, in which she describes Chantal's intentions: she wanted to make the desert anonymous so that whoever sees the piece can imagine that what they see is what they know. Indeed, the landscape images could have been shot on different continents. But the point of departure for the installation piece was creating the multilayered sound mix around the idea of the five screens and the sound jumbled among all the screens. Claire writes: "*NOW* was born first of all with the sound. Chantal told me that she wanted the spectator to experience fear, war, flight, imminent catastrophe through the entanglement of soundtracks in a space inhabited by images of the desert. She wanted us to live

the chaos, to feel the degree to which our world is haunted by violence.”²

NOW is all about the present of its spectators, because the filmmaker has covered her creative traces and has made sure that the dense collage of sounds referring to multiple countries and cultures reveals nothing other than what is viewed and heard. There is no message, but there are sensations of being there, unable to see, unable to dominate the world that we are driven through. The past has disappeared. It is not there anymore, obliterated by violence. If the past affects the present through the act of unconscious memory as in Proust, there is no trace of it in *NOW*. We are moved through time by forces that are not in our power to control. Many of Akerman's works—*D'Est* (*From the East*, France/Belgium, 1993), *Sud* (*South*, France/Belgium, 1999), *De l'autre côté* (*From the Other Side*, Belgium, 2002), *Demain on déménage* (*Tomorrow We Move*, France/Belgium, 2004), *Là-bas* (*Down There*, Belgium/France, 2006), *La Folie Almayer* (*Almayer's Folly*, France/Belgium, 2011), and *NOW*—reflect on the idea that the present is what counts and nothing else, even if the present is haunted by the past, as in *Sud* and *La Folie Almayer* and her last film, *No Home Movie* (France/Belgium, 2015). For Chantal, living in the present was the most important thing to do. Many of her works, ever since her first film, testify to this philosophy.

NOW is Chantal Akerman's final work. When she was in Venice, unbeknownst to her, she had completed her creative trajectory. It began with *Saute ma ville* (*Blow Up My Town*, Belgium) in 1967 in the kitchen of a young girl, focusing on the individuality of one person, and it concluded in Venice in 2015 as a global statement about the world we live in, in which immersion in a crowd is part of every individual's trajectory.

Notes

1. *NOW* was commissioned as an installation for the 2015 Venice Biennale, and as of 2018 it is in the collection of the Jewish Museum in New York.
2. “*NOW* est née d’abord par le son. Chantal disait qu’elle voulait qu’on éprouve la peur, la guerre, la fuite, la catastrophe imminente par l’enchevêtrement de bandes sonores dans un espace habité par des images de désert. Elle voulait qu’on vive le chaos, qu’on ressente à quel point notre monde est détraqué par la violence.” Claire Atherton, e-mail to the author, 28 February 2018.

Babette Mangolte (US, born in France) is an experimental filmmaker and photographer who is known internationally and lives in New York. Her installations create architectural spaces exploring different modes of interactivity for the spectators. Her writing on filmmaking practices and the impact that digital tools have had on filmmaking since the end of the twentieth century is soon to appear in a book edited by Luca lo Pinto. For further details, see www.babettemangolte.org.



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