

inconsistent fiction pieces that spawn a reality all their own. Play is at once form and content.

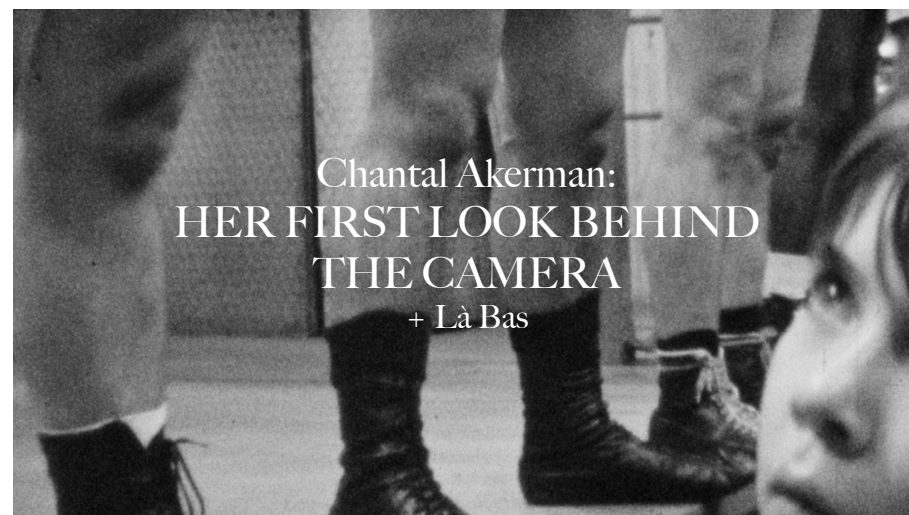
“You should only do what you really feel like doing,” Akerman once told friend and colleague Eric de Kuyper. A seemingly banal command but paradoxically an almost impossible task as a young director. Yet, De Kuyper notes, “It’s that simple with her; and also that complicated. For making such radical choices presupposes incredible courage – in a profession that already demands a lot of this virtue – the courage of despair.” Cinema is indeed the art form most governed by rules and regulations. Akerman was allowed to start at INSAS but it was not an unqualified success. After a few months, she quit. “Nobody took me seriously at that school,” she later said of her time spent at the institution. “They just laughed at me. I realised that I had to make a film to earn any respect at all. So I went to work for a bank, just long enough to finance a short film, which I shot when I was eighteen.” Very soon she realised that film school would not allow her to do *what she really felt like doing*. Her first full-fledged short film, *Saute ma ville*, is the result of that rebellion. From its opening minute, the film shows resistance to a prescribed form of cinema. The opening panel “Recit,” accompanied by a humming Akerman, makes it immediately ironically clear that the viewer should not expect a classic narrative. What follows is something radically simple: she locks herself in a kitchen, cooks, eats, appears to be cleaning but ultimately creates a total mess that will culminate in the gas explosion to which the film’s title refers.

“If you make films, you should never do something you don’t really enjoy doing, that doesn’t really concern you,” De Kuyper further agrees. “But that which concerns you is sometimes so hidden, sometimes so intimate and therefore also futile and trivial, that you hardly dare admit it to yourself, let alone make films about it.” Unlike what is too often taught in film schools, cinema does not have to be about visionary mastery or abstract virtuosity. That’s what makes these very first films so poignant. They contain a seed of a conviction that cinema does not require grandiose ideas, that film can be something very simple, if one finds the courage to get to know and trust one’s own means. What is moving is Akerman’s fascination with filmmaking itself and how she gives very everyday elements their place in that world of images. Looking back at the personal oeuvre she carved out over five decades, these short films testify to the perseverance Akerman showed in creating her access to the world of cinema all by herself. ♦

Coming soon to Acropolis:

-*In Our Day* + *small flower* (Dir. Hong Sangsoo, 2023/2022)—May 26 at 2220 Arts + Archives
-*Beijing Watermelon* (Nobuhiko Obayashi, 1989)—Los Angeles premiere of new 2K restoration, June 8 at 2220 Arts + Archives

Acropolis Cinema presents:



May 11, 2024 – 2220 Arts + Archives

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ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Unknown until recently, these four 8mm films were discovered in 2021 in the collection of the Royal Film Archive of Belgium. Shot by Chantal Akerman during the summer of 1967 in Brussels and Knokke to enroll at the INSAS film school, which she left a few months later, these four shorts precede *Saute ma ville* (1968), the director's first known and recognized film in her established filmography.

Across the shorts, Akerman films the Foire de Midi, a fair that takes place every summer in Brussels, as well as the courtyard of the Hôtel de Clèves-Ravenstein, where by chance, 50 years later, the Chantal Akerman Foundation was created. Meanwhile, on the Belgian coast in Knokke, Marilyn Watelet, Akerman's childhood friend with whom she founded the production company Paradise Films in the 1970s, and her own mother Natalia Akerman, become the protagonists of a short fiction in two parts that takes place in the shops of the seaside resort.

Followed by:

Là-bas (Dir. Chantal Akerman, 2006, 78 min) | Introduced by Nina Menkes

An intensely personal and aching work by one of cinema's leading filmmakers, *Là-bas* reveals a stripped down, vulnerable Chantal Akerman tackling a subject that has arguably haunted her entire oeuvre.

TRT: 94 min

Access to the World of Cinema by Gerard-Jan Claes

The following article was originally published by Sabzian, March 20, 2024

Asked about his favourite films of 2023, Pedro Costa's answer was clear and concise: "Nothing moved me more than the four four-minute films that Chantal Akerman shot in 1967 – a year before *Saute ma ville* [1968] – as her application to the INSAS in Brussels." Akerman's actual debut, only recently rediscovered, thus consists of four short films, shot on 8 mm, silent and in black-and-white, in 1967 in Brussels and Knokke. Yet it's more than the mere discovery of the earliest work of a celebrated filmmaker that makes the findings in question so poignant.

There's a tendency to rather conveniently discern the announcement of an entire body of work in an artist's initial achievements, motifs that can programmatically structure an entire repertoire, thereby suppressing the pieces' inherent quality. It's equally tempting to look at these short films with this preconceived view. Akerman films Brussels and its inhabitants, a friend doing the dishes, her mother in a shoe shop, herself posing in front of a convertible; everyday scenes observed as well as staged, with protagonists and

actions that will come to play a crucial role in her work until the end of her career. More impressive, however, is the discovery of exactly what she wanted to make and submit as a seventeen-year-old aspiring filmmaker for the entrance exam of a film school in the late 1960s. The story is well known: It was Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le fou* that drove Akerman, in 1965 at the age of fifteen, to try her hand at cinema. Without this epiphany, the discovery of a cinema unbound, she would most probably have become a writer, she claims herself.

If one wants to make films, to become a filmmaker, one usually applies to a film school. Even today, access to the world of cinema proceeds mainly through the institution in question. To enrol, applicants must first pass an entrance exam. As non-filmmakers, they must first prove they are already something of a filmmaker, with something to offer. In the late 1960s, making a short film was part of INSAS' entrance exam. Akerman made two short films in Brussels and two at the seaside town of Knokke. The first film is a short impression of the annual Midi Fair in Brussels. She films the movements and lights of the attractions, observes people standing in front of stalls, eating snacks and having fun. The second Brussels clip shows Marilyn Watelet, the childhood friend with whom she later founded the production company Paradise Films in the 1970s, Marilyn's sister Claudine and their mother Nicole. Remarkably, the first footage is set in the former Clèves-Ravenstein house, located near the film museum of the Royal Belgian Film Archive, now known as CINEMATEK. It is also here that, fifty years later, the Chantal Akerman Foundation would be founded. Later, we see Marilyn and Claudine strolling down the street, stopping at a newsstand, doing the dishes, adorning their hair. The first clip in Knokke shows Marilyn looking at the window of a shoe shop. Shortly afterwards, we find her back in a clothing store, looking at some clothes and trying on a hat. The scene is clearly staged, Marilyn occasionally lunging uncomfortably at the camera, she sets up for the shot and repeats her actions, as if asked to perform several takes. The second Knokke shot starts with a series of parked sports cars, including a scene where we see Akerman herself posing next to one of the cars. Then we return to Marilyn standing in front of a shop window. In the shop, she peers at shoes, then Akerman's mother, Natalia, comes into view. On a bench in the shop, she tries on pairs of shoes. Then Marilyn again, also trying on shoes and looking at herself in the mirror. Then she inspects a series of handbags; we see a saleswoman looking at Marilyn and Natalia, and the clip ends with Marilyn walking past Natalia after a direction note.

Is it already clear from these short films what type of filmmaker Chantal Akerman would become? Perhaps not. The four films are small exercises, they "tell" us nothing, they're not really about anything. What the films mainly reveal is a determinate pleasure in filmmaking, in the art of looking, and in the making and organising of images. For her entry exam, Akerman did not adhere to any particular idea of cinema but simply pursued a very personal fascination. She displays no sought-after skill or false, lofty ambition, no implicit desire to make grand, weighty cinema. At no point does she hint at any particular content. What we see is a filmmaker playing, taking pleasure in the act of staging, just like children diving into a box of costumes and constructing short, fleeting,