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01.30.14

Chantal Akerman, *Un Jour Pina m'a demandé* (One Day Pina Asked..., 1983), color, sound, 57 minutes.

A BEAT, and then, of course: Who better to make a documentary about Pina Bausch than Chantal Akerman? Her 1976 classic *Jeanne Dielman* is not just a film but a choreography of the everyday, made manic through the stringency of its rehearsal. Screening at the Walter Reade Theater as part of the long-running "Dance on Camera" series, Akerman's 1983 *Un Jour Pina m'a demandé* (released in the US as *One Day Pina Asked...*), follows Bausch's Wuppertal, Germany-based troupe as they bring their compound of dance and theater, *Tanztheater*, to venues in Milan, Venice, and Avignon, France. The two make a fortuitous couple, their collaboration a pared instance of the art-and-dance world crossovers that epitomized New York's Judson moment of two decades prior.

Bausch is typically figured as an expressionist, heir to the modernist tradition of *Ausdrucksstanz* (literally, "dance of expression") pioneered by Rudolf von Laban on the cusp of World War I. Analogizing Bausch to Judson might thus seem strained, as Laban's variety of angular, operatic indulgence sits poorly with the "ordinary" affect often attributed to Judson. Yet the strength of Akerman's treatment is to reveal how tenuous this binarization is: how *Ausdrucksstanz*'s premium on involvement need not preclude Judson's particular mode of distancing. Captured by cinematographer Babette Mangolte, a frequent Akerman collaborator and key documenter of New York's downtown dance scene, Bausch's work reads as equally about emotion—about "moving or being moved," to invert Yvonne Rainer's famous proscription—and its blockage: ineffability, estrangement, and the occlusion produced by cliché. Thus positioned, Bausch's project both shadows and challenges humanism, comprising works at once "about a kind of humanity" (in Bausch's words) and critical of humanism's ideal of unfettered self-expressivity, of the self fully transparent to itself.

Consider one of the film's first shots: a close-up on a female dancer's face, its contours sharpened by a spotlight. Fixed at a downward diagonal, her eyes gaze inward as her hands slide slowly from her forehead to her cheeks, stretching her skin like so much putty as they descend. In the background, a recording of Edith Piaf's "La Vie en Rose" plays, the singer's clotted tremor suffusing the scene with vague melancholy. Later, in a fragment from *Nelken* (Carnations), a man dressed in a backless evening gown excerpts ballet's repertoire of forms in hysteric succession. "Là! Là! Là! Là! Là!" he intones as he executes *jétés en tournant*, ending the sequence with a sweep of the arms and an exasperated scream. "What else do you want to see? What do I have to show you now?" he entreats in French.

Bausch's choreography comes as a critique of such displays of balletic virtuosity and their compulsion to pictorialize: to interrupt movement with moments of suspension, wherein the dancer's body is offered, frontal and stilled, to the observer's eye. The body as presented to the audience—its status as "a thing to be viewed," to borrow a phrase from art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty—is here problematized. In *Kontakthof*, the German term for a place where prostitutes pick up clients, a mass of men in suits surround a woman, her eyes closed and her face heavily powdered. They proceed to perform a litany of stock gestures, of the sort which one expects from a grandmother or schoolyard crush: They tussle her hair, pinch her cheeks, tickle her ears, nuzzle her stomach, flick her skin. Iterated at an increasing clip,

their caresses devolve into an assault, and the woman, limp limbed, grows more and more distraught.

Such slides of the mundane into the manic are an Akerman specialty. Her camera renders the scene in a single shot trained on the female victim's face. Such focused framing is typical of Akerman's approach. While recent attempts to document Bausch's choreography indulge an impulse to visualize in full—Wim Wenders's 2011 *Pina* being a case in point—Akerman's effort resists the same. Selections from *Walzer* (Waltzes), *Nelken*, and *1980* gesture toward a multiplicity of onstage actions while withholding the whole from vision. A woman devours, then spits out an apple; a man extends and retracts a cigarette from a waiting female mouth; a line of seated dancers cross and uncross their legs in a sendup of the revue's synchronized spectacle. In each instance, our view is partial. Full disclosure is far from the point.

Denying its viewer the idealized vantage of Wenders's sinuous tracking shots, *Un Jour* reproduces the pull between meaning and its impasse that structures Bausch's dances. Focused under Akerman's lens, Bausch's oeuvre resolves as a matter of the quotidian, pathologized, its order deranged not through an absence but an acceleration of some underlying logic: something, in other words, like the readymade subject of an Akerman film.

— Courtney Fiske

The 42nd "Dance on Camera" festival is copresented by the Film Society of Lincoln Center and Dance Films Association and runs January 31–February 4 at the Walter Reade Theater. Akerman's Un Jour Pina m'a demandé (One Day Pina Asked...) screens Saturday, February 1, at 11 AM.

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