Since 1969, having shot thousands of hours of videotape that are a diary of his life and a time capsule of New York’s downtown scene, MICHEL AUDER reformulates reality through a voyeuristic stance and a poetic style of editing. In this rare 1993 interview by CAROLE ANN KLOMARIDES, reprinted here alongside an intimate newly-commissioned series of portraits shot by LULA HYERS in the artist’s Brooklyn apartment, he explains his work as eavesdropping in on a universal stream of consciousness.
When you moved from film to video, you began to adapt a more, for lack of a better word, "documentary diaristic" style. Was that through Warhol? Or how do you see that occurring?

Michel Auder

When I moved to New York, Warhol had already become a big influence for me. And after I got to be right in the middle of it, around all those people—Visa and the Factory group... That's when I started documenting everyone I knew.

CAK

What year was this, about?

MA

1969, '70, '71, and on.

CAK

That was a time when the media was starting to influence alternative film—the idea of The Celebrity, Cinema Vérité.

MA

The Warhol group came to my home—but then other people came to my home too. My life became documented in relation to what I saw or what I didn't see; I would catch just a little bit of the moment. Of course, you miss most of it. It was not in any way a documentary, not to be related as truth. The work reflects my own feelings. I only expose what I want—and not to be related as truth. The work reflects my own vision of my world, a variation of themes. Some times the variation is my vision of my world, and sometimes it's of the world in general: a continuum?

CAK

I would be shooting them.

MA

Yeah. That's where writing comes in.

CAK

You told me that for many years, you carried around a camera, and you had it with you so often that people forgot your presence and your taping.

MA

I have a camera out with me all the time. When people came to my home, they knew they were stepping into my studio. They'd know I would be shooting them.

CAK

Do you see this process as a seamless continuum?

MA

I call some of my tapes variations, like a piece of music—a variation of themes. Sometimes the variation is my vision of my world, and sometimes it's of the world in general: what's on television, nature, or people close and of interest to me. Those are the three main things I deal with all day long.

CAK

By "what's on television," do you mean you shoot images off the TV?

MA

Right. By shooting off television, I can record what is emphasized by the media at a certain time, what people want you to know. I receive and I shoot it, transforming it in my own way. And I am obsessed by all the violence. I record it and use it in my work.

CAK

The media invades a person's personal environment. The radio, the stereo, the television—they are in your home and a part of your life. What I noticed in your work is that you connect certain information shot off television to nature, and to the family, and to the personal.

MA

I like to shoot TV images when I travel. When I go to a hotel, I put on the television, especially in other countries. During the war in Iraq, for three weeks I only worked with TV. I reshoot it, take close-ups of things. I have ten hours of footage.

CAK

Why do that rather than taping it with a VCR?

MA

All my work goes through my camera. I believe that when I shoot something, I give it my other life.

CAK

Like Warhol, you're silent. We don't hear or see you in your tapes. How do you think you are identified through your work?

MA

I like to be identified as a voyeur.

CAK

You had an interesting mix of people on the tapes. They were poets, writers, actors. Kind of the downtown New York scene, but of a certain kind of that scene.

MA

Yeah, the hardcore people.

CAK

Now what do you mean by hardcore?

(BREAK IN TAPE)

MA

I stopped going to school when I was 17. My father was gone. My reputation is from the streets. I'd go to bars and stuff... I don't know how to explain. There was a famous bar in St. German des Prés where all the best American jazz players would come and play. They jammed at this place called the Chat qui Pe- che. The owner, who was always drunk, and a poet, took a liking to me. He tried to fuck me because he was a friend. He helped me out. He was a father figure to me. If you have Rimbau as your idol, then you see the kind of life he's living. You know, Rimbau was a great artist and a great poet, but he was really fucked up. So I got accepted for being like this myself.

CAK

Do you consider that being a Romantic?

MA

I did. The artists of the 19th century were my idea of how an artist should be. So I copied that a little bit—and then it caught up with me. By that time, when I was a teenager, everybody was using drugs like zombies, shooting up heroin. I wasn't touching one fucking drug until I hit 22, you know. When I came to America, I was 25. At that time, I was smoking hashish and opium. I loved opium. In those years, everybody was lying down on the floor and putting on pipes made of bamboo, smoking liquid opium wherever they got it, like wine. And we just did that all day long... dreaming...

MA

But sometimes you'd pick up the camera and you'd shoot.

CAK

Right. Shooting was my identity. That was my work. I was, and I am, absolutely convinced that that was and is my job.

MA

Over a twenty-year period, you've taped some of the same characters. For example, your daughter is on tape from her birth to college. How does that affect your work, recording something as personal as your own blood, kin? You're seeing her grow and change through the lens of the camera. How has this affected her?

CAK

I think it has blunted her memory, and she might resent it sometimes. She has said to me a few times that it's difficult to see all that past stuff. She believes that's her life. But let's face it, whatever I have on videotape of her life is about 2,000 hours. 2,000 hours in twenty-one years is absolutely nothing, time-wise. You know what I mean? It's only a little drop in the bucket. That's not reality. Nothing is real if it's from the camera context and editing change everything. I see it as a pointing light, inevitably fixed to the time the event was shot. I don't deal with the material as soon as it's made; it's only years later that I can work with it. I store it up. I wait until I can look at it and say, "What was I doing?"

MA

Have any of your subjects resented your control, or the use of them in your work?

CAK

Not really. With my daughter, I'm releasing material slowly, because as time goes by, and she's much older, it's better. She's on tape masturbating when she was three years old—I don't think she can deal with it now. It hasn't come to the point where I'm asking her permission. My daughter and I are having an interesting new chapter in our life. She's just written a book, a novel, about me and Viva, her mother.

MA

Oh! She's turned the tables.

CAK

Right. I don't look too good in it.

MA

No? You've read it.
I CAN... DISAPPEAR BEFORE YOUR EYES KILLING YOU.
GULF WAR

TV WAR
Yeah. She gave it to me. She said “Dad, you're the first person to read it.” It's written as a fictional novel, but it's not a true novel.

Do you see your work as psychological at all? Is it analyzing anything, or is it more, “If it be my friends—but I wouldn't really call them my friends. What is it that I am doing? That's the story of envy about flying. It is an interesting point of view that I'm missing on this planet. Then fire has always been my obsession. When I was growing up, we had a beautiful house; my father couldn't afford the money to put the coal in the furnace, but there were fireplaces in all the rooms, so I would sleep with fire in the fireplace. I would peek from under the coal and see the fire send big shadows onto the wall. So I guess that’s maybe where it comes from.

We were talking about the Moroccan tapes, which were done in a very, very strange, kind of hippie time. You taped hours and hours of footage and then, twenty years later, went back and edited it into a piece. Of course, now that you're clean, it's a whole different perspective. Can you talk a little bit about the experience of going back and re-editing that material, compared to the experience of “being there” when it was shot?

I shot the material in 1971, did a first edit in 1976, then a re-edit in 1993. Some think I might be making a movie. There's a different perspective, but I'm not destroying the edit I made in 1976. I keep it available. I'm just re-editing the material and making a new work.

Recently, when you showed a tape shot in Morocco in the early ’70s and re-edited in the late ’80s to a student audience, you were criticized for recreating your experience into a homoerotic piece to be sensational.

That's right! But I was with homosexuals at the time; they created the ambiance, and I recorded it my own way. I focused on the most interesting person in the group, and he started to project his story: for instance, by killing a soap ball (or perhaps the hustler) of a German artist, an extraordinary person. He acted out a whole takedown of being a social gatherer, gathering herbs and then cooking it in this instantaneous way that is about survival; and secondly, by the on-camera seduction. I'm describing only their behavior, not mine.

Does the theoretical deconstruction of culture and sexuality affect the way you tape and view things?

Hopefully it hasn't. “Politically correct” is only politically correct as the day goes by. It doesn't mean how correct one is, it means correct later. I'm politically correct only with myself. It's a readjustment day by day; there's no formula.

Now the last tape you made, Magnetic Notes: Voyage To The Center Of The Phone Lines (1993), is video shot off a bluff, looking out at the ocean and nature where you were in rehab. The audio was collected for a year from conversations on car phones. This is a very different tape from what you've ever made before.

Well, that description you just gave is not what happened at all. But that, like, that dream of rehabbing by looking out of my window. In reality, rehab is a hospital for thirty days with no views.

We're going to take four years. And Cindy Sherman, my wife, for a year. By then, I had acquired my own identity, and I couldn't really get too close to him, because he would turn you into one of his minions.

You've been involved with some pretty powerful women, too: Viva and then Cindy Sherman. How do you think that's affected your work?

Greatly. When I met Cindy, I didn't realize she was so powerful. I guess she never realized it either. Or maybe she didn't. I know, you've been ten years we've been toge-ring! There are contemporary artists who I think are better than me, but she's one of the best. I aspire to reach her level.