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The Intentions of Inattention: The Opacity of Chantal Akerman's Peculiar Places

Since the establishment of Performance Studies, it has been broadly accepted that the discipline must find alternatives to the theatrical production of place. Yet to posit another place—an outside—merely reifies the exclusionary constitution of the theatrical site. Assuming the circularity of seeking external alternatives, this paper explores a potential space of internal intermediation by examining bodies, boundaries, and the site of the event in Chantal Akerman's performances of non-particular places.

Akerman is well-known for her forays into territory between genres, genders, and nationalities. In her early films, Akerman restricts her odd vagabonds to curiously generic locations, and by displacing markers that condition the dramatic instant of recognition, she guides character and spectator into suspended space. Without recourse to recognition, the structures binding the event to a particular place unravel, and the avoidance of this theatrical moment endows these films their peculiar affect—an ethos of inattention. My paper then applies this analysis to Akerman's renewed experiments with spatial boundaries in recent installation work, in which she transposes a translucent surface between spectator and cinematic image. By investigating the resulting inclusion and exclusion of the spectator from the event's immanence as image, I wish to articulate Akerman's example as a performative mode whose active deferral of the particularity of place produces a site—a skin or screen-- organized according to the spectator's passing singularity rather than the tragic necessity of theatrical form.