

*Vertical*

During Alice's trip to Wonderland, after each of her metamorphoses (whether undergone or undertaken), she is asked, "Who are *you*?". *Vertical* is Alice Anderson's third video creation, a contemporary tale about a quest for individual and social identity –this being a recurrent, even obsessional, theme in her films, which are joined, in her oeuvre, by photography, installations, drawings and publishing. (In August 2003 she tried to solve this problem by submitting to the British parliament a bill that would have allowed any individual aged eighteen or over to choose his or her identity, either by creating one from scratch or by an exchange with an existing identity(1).)

A prologue to *Verticale* presents the film in connection with the preceding video, *Ma Mère*: "The girl (A...) has had enough of being constantly forced to put herself out just to please her mother. She goes off somewhere she can start afresh. But life is no better there, and the price to be paid is steeper than she imagined. She now turns into a form of merchandise, and becomes... a building."(2)

The stage is set. Alfred Jarry and the theatre of the absurd, Edgar Allan Poe and Lewis Carroll are summoned to the creation of a supernatural reality made up of fantasy, strangeness and fable. With humour, and having fun taking things at face value, Anderson, in whimsical and falsely candid fashion, criticises "the transformation of immaterial human aspirations into a hard, mercantile form of material"(3). The film closes with a view of the Empire State Building, which is both the new identity taken on by A... and a symbol, in its time, of capitalism built on the very concept of verticality. But *Verticale* also talks implicitly about the fragile construction and mental evolution of a creature who, having been deprived of her sensitive, emotional foundations, is threatened with petrification and fragmentation. "She had become terribly hardened. She could no longer even feel what was happening inside her. Was she going to collapse?" (4) The structure of the film follows the fantasy logic of dreams and imagination that pervades the world of tales. This logic shakes up reality, taking improbability as its stock in trade, short-circuiting narrative links and cutting out all pathos and psychology. It moves forward by associations of ideas and images in a succession of visual and dialogic planes made up of comings and goings ellipses. Behind this formal disjunction, if one holds to a linear, discursive logic, is the artist's desire to bring out "the poetry and magic of objects, by adopting the viewpoint of childhood". More than a metaphorical language, this is an instantiation of the principle of metamorphosis, an *Acting as if...* which subjects reality to the power of the imagination. Images are thus endowed with the gift of speech, and play roles, often by allegorical synecdoche. The sun and its reflection represent the eye of the controller, while a close-up of parts of a body (as blurred and partial as the identity is evanescent) stands for A... The face appears only when the construction of the identity has been completed. The ever-changing pace follows movements of thought and dialogue; and the music, which is repetitive to the point of obsession, creates a tension that seems to speak of adherence to a link (or links).

The camerawork is intimate, subjective, narcissistic, with tight shots (wider shots are rare) and high or low angles, expressing the young woman's fantasised reality: "Is the sky always so cluttered round here?" she asks, after raising her eyes towards this dreamt-of "somewhere else" only to see a mass of cables, walkways, bridges, trains... The static shots, including those in black which are treated as receptacles of our own images, and not as emptiness, alternate with the accelerated fluidity of abstract shots made up of fleeting reflections –metaphors of the freedom that is necessary to dreaming and the imagination. As a "handywoman of wonders"(5), Anderson is an absolute magician, presiding over the creation of a universe that she intends to maintain at her own scale.

There is no crew or professional equipment, no special effects or doctoring of the photography. The videos are filmed by a group of friends. Rather than an over-refined technique which would risk wiping out the memory of the gesture, she opts for the hand-made, the improvised, with free rein given to the spontaneous and the unforeseen. In order to make us see the departure of A... in a boat, for example, there is a shot of factory chimneys, with the imitated sound of a siren; and out of this metaphorical collision a fictional reality is born. Her most recent video, *No More Fears*, 2004, is a totally non-logical pseudo-detective fiction which proposes to fight fear by eradicating sensibility therapeutically, with toys as accessories in this grim contract.

Anderson states that her all videos "belong to a context of proposals for a world". Thus they are always shown in particular environments (installations, stagings, etc.), and accompanied by publications. *Verticale* was designed for two installations: leaking water forming an enigmatic pool on a floor, and a strange staircase between floor and ceiling (not so far produced). It was also presented along with the audio piece *Laughter* (a woman's laugh, spellbinding to the extent of being disturbing), and the installation *Marvellous* (a floor strewn with small wild flowers) (6). The video *Belle Rive* (a young woman searching for a man) contains some Hitchcock-like clues. With multiple entry points, the journey on which the viewer is taken adds to the mystery of the fiction. The pleasure of the plot, the intrigue –the hoax– is barely concealed. For *La Maison du Dr. Edwards*(7), Anderson simulated the sale of a period house she had turned into a space for exhibition and habitation, and led those who replied to her advertisement on a real-bogus treasure hunt.

As the heroine of her own adventures, which she sees as ways of incorporating herself into the world, Alice Anderson brings to life a personal mythology spun out of dreams and play, where the poetic is fuelled by "the craziness of a delirious imagination"(3). She invents a reality in which "everything, as Witold Gombrowicz says, is woven out of childhood", an inexhaustible reality in which "the most beautiful films are those of the imagination"(3).

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translated from French by John Doherty

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- (1) See 72 (*projets pour ne plus y penser*), a joint publication by Frac Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, the Centre national de l'estampe et de l'art Imprimé and Espace Paul Ricard, 2004.
- (2) This prologue was written by Anderson for the cinema programme *Imaginé* at the Centre Pompidou, 2003.
- (3) In the artist's own words.
- (4) From the epilogue Anderson wrote for the cinema programme *Imaginé* at the Centre Pompidou, 2003.
- (5) The expression comes from Christine Macel's "Bricoleuse de merveilleux", in *Alice Anderson – cahier d'écolière*, co-published by Frac Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur and the Yvon Lambert gallery, 2003.
- (6) At the Chapelle de la Persévérance, Tarascon, 2003, as part of a Frac's project.
- (7) At the Marnay art centre, Camac, July 2004.