

Varda / Cuba exhibition

Centre Pompidou, Paris (November 11, 2015-February 1, 2016)

How do you exhibit a film? This question has been on the minds of curators, film scholars and art historians ever since the moving image first entered the museum space. *Varda / Cuba*, an exhibition in the photo gallery of the Centre Pompidou in Paris, offers a surprisingly simple answer: you break down the film into its component parts, namely individual frames, and hang them on the gallery wall.

Trips to Cuba were par for the course for French artists and intellectuals in the early 1960s. Jean-Paul Sartre travelled to the Caribbean island to take stock of the achievements of the revolution, as did actor Gérard Philippe, writer Marguerite Duras and photographer René Burri, a Swiss native and honorary French cultural establishment figure, who came back from Cuba with one of the great iconic images of the 20th century, the portrait of Che Guevara smoking a cigar and defiantly looking upwards past the camera. Also traveling with her camera in Cuba was Agnès Varda, who visited the island from December 1962 to January 1963. Varda had established herself as a major filmmaker in 1961 with *Cléo de 5 à 7*, the film that prevented the Nouvelle Vague from becoming yet another all male chapter in the history of cinema. During her trip to Cuba, Varda took about 1800 photographs. She photographed politicians, functionaries, and particularly women in positions of political responsibility, from government officials to diplomats. But Varda also photographed the life beyond the scene of politics: musicians, dancers, people in the streets, gestures, looks, attitudes, interactions. After her return to Paris, Varda edited the photographs into a half-hour film, which she called *Salut les Cubains*, with a running commentary by Varda herself and her actor-friend Michel Piccoli. The title referred to a ragingly successful French pop culture magazine of the early 1960s, *Salut les copains*, which made sense particularly because the film also contained a music track with popular songs from Cuba. The stars of the film include singer and dancer Benny Moré, who died before the film was completed and thus appears in *Salut les Cubains* posthumously, dancing in intermittent steps to one of his songs. The commentary elucidates the photographs with a subtle play of shifting meanings, which undermines any intimation of officialdom that this product of a quasi-state visit might have carried. In Varda's commentary, for instance, there is a short way from 'corps diplomatique', the diplomatic corps, to the 'corps des femmes',

the bodies of Cuban women, which Varda describes, both in photographs and words, as 'taking the shape of the letter S in constant movement'.

Today, *Salut les Cubains* and the photographs from which the film was composed, constitute an artistic ethnography of everyday life in Cuba in the early years of the revolution. At the same time, Varda's work in Cuba marks a pivot towards a politically engaged form of filmmaking, which she would further expand in later works of the 1960s. In 1967, for instance, she collaborated with Alain Resnais, Jean-Luc Godard, William Klein and Joris Ivens on *Loin du Vietnam*, a collective work which chronicles the American war of attrition against North Vietnam from the point of view of the civilian population. And in 1968, while in California to negotiate a contract with a Hollywood studio, which didn't materialize when the studio refused to grant Varda final cut, Varda shot a film on the *Black Panther* party in Oakland, which stands as one of the great works of political documentary cinema and feels eerily contemporary in the light of recent police abuses against African American citizens in the United States.

From these later works, *Salut les Cubains* and the Cuban photographs differ in the cheerfulness they exude, but also in terms of the unusual technique that lead from the photographs to the film – the montage of a film as a succession of still photographs. Varda's colleague Chris Marker employed a similar technique in his now-canonical science fiction film *La jetée* from 1963, which is also composed of still images. Where *La jetée* is a film in 'immediate short-term memory', as Julian Hochberg once argued, *Salut les Cubains* has a very different effect. By lining up still photographs of bodies in movement in rapid succession, the film turns photography into a form of sculpture in time, transforming stills into the successive steps of a dance. At the same time, the film retains a documentary attitude and seizes with great accuracy an expressive repertoire of body attitudes and gestures, which constitute the fabric of a community.

That *Salut les Cubains* depends for its effect on the artistic quality of the individual photographs provides the organizing principle of the *Varda / Cuba* exhibition at the Centre Pompidou. Varda originally trained as a photographer, and while she shot her first feature film, *La pointe courte* in 1954, she never ceased to work as a photographer. While some of her colleagues, such as her friend and long-time partner in dialogue Jean-Luc Godard forever rack their brains over the question of what an image is, Varda, now 88 years old and shooting her next film, lines up one inventive image and striking composition after another throughout her career as a filmmaker – to the point where one is often tempted to freeze the frames and place them in a frame to be displayed on a wall. Which is exactly what *Varda / Cuba* did for *Salut les Cubains*. The occasion for the exhibition is a donation: Varda has recently bequeathed her Cuban photo archive, which is a core element of her photographic oeuvre, to the Centre Pompidou. The exhibition consisted of a display of the component parts of the film on the walls of the Centre's *Galérie des Photographies*. The effect was to open up a space between the images and between the still image and the film, and to relate the rhythm of the film and the temporality of the individual photographs to each other in

striking and productive new ways. Another, equally important effect was to remind the visitor that Varda is not only an accomplished filmmaker – and, more recently, installation artist – but first and foremost a maker of images, a first rate photographer.

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