

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

ARTFORUM

*In Her Own Time*

*Miriam Rosen in Conversation with Chantal Akerman*

(April 2004)



Chantal Akerman, *Chantal Akerman by Chantal Akerman*, 1996, 63 minutes.

Static shot, interior, day. Frontal view of an airy, white-walled, white-curtained apartment furnished with worktables and chairs (three each), computers (two). A shaggy dog enters smack in the middle of the frame, tail to the camera. As he takes his place front left, a slight, dark-haired woman in a dark jacket and pants enters and sits down on the chair front right.

Such is the beginning of *Chantal Akerman by Chantal Akerman* (1996), a first in the history of the venerable French public-television series *Cinema, of Our Time*, each installment of which had been—until then—one filmmaker’s profile of another. As Chantal Akerman (the woman in the chair) explains at the outset, since the directors she suggested had already been filmed, she proposed a self-portrait “with the idea of making my old films talk, of treating them as if they were rushes that I’d edit to create a new film, which would be my portrait of me.”

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However, she goes on, the producers wanted her not only to appear on-screen but to talk about herself, and “that’s where the problems started.”

Medium close-up. By way of solution, Akerman offers a series of halting “attempts” to discuss her work—or rather, to read the bits of text she has written around and about it, punctuated by fade-outs and ultimately presented in the third person because (as in the long Jewish joke she tells about a man so incapable of vaunting the merits of his cow at market that a neighbor has to do it for him) she prefers her films “when somebody else talks about them.” In fact, the only movie she mentions is *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), the two-hundred-minute chronicle of three days in the life of a widowed Brussels housewife turned part-time prostitute which brought the twenty-five-year-old director to the attention of art-film and feminist circles. Rather, after a fleeting reference to her intrepid beginnings in Brussels at the age of eighteen and the early years with practically no money and no audience, she enumerates what the “good cow salesman” would point out: “language, documentary, fiction, Jews and the second commandment . . . frontal images.” And the fact that she was born in Belgium in 1950, that her parents were Polish Jews, and that “her cinema is totally impregnated with that.” And her persistent struggle to escape these (and other) categories.

Close-up. The story of her maternal grandmother’s deportation to Auschwitz, of her paintings, which were lost, and of her diary, which survived.

Static shot. Interior, night. In a “last attempt” that follows some forty-five minutes of unidentified excerpts from a selection of her work to date, the filmmaker (now seated in an armchair) states: “My name is Chantal Akerman, I was born in Brussels. And that’s the truth. That’s the truth.”

As Akerman initially envisioned, the films—fifteen of them presented in nonchronological order, like a vast audiovisual stream of consciousness—are left to do most of the talking. They talk, for example, about immigration and migration, from the Eastern European Jews of her grandparents’ generation in *Histoires d’Amérique* (*American Stories*, 1988) to her own discovery of New York in *News from Home* (1976), stylistically marked by the experimental cinema of Michael Snow and Jonas Mekas but accompanied by her mother’s letters from Brussels (which Akerman herself reads in voice-over).

They talk about coming of age, from the “tragicomic burlesque” of her first film, *Saute ma ville* (*Blow Up My City*, 1968), and the early sexual questioning of *Je tu il elle* (1974), both of which feature Akerman as the young woman in question, to later versions of same in *J’ai faim, j’ai froid* (*I’m Hungry, I’m Cold*, 1984) and *Portrait d’une jeune fille de la fin des années 60 à Bruxelles* (*Portrait of a Young Girl at the End of the ’60s in Brussels*, 1993).

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They talk about music and dance, in a remarkable montage of sequences from the avant-garde *Toute une nuit* (All Night Long, 1982); *Les Années 80* (The Eighties, 1983), which was literally a dress rehearsal for a musical comedy in progress, *Golden Eighties* (1985); and *Un jour Pina m'a demandé* (One Day Pina Asked Me, 1983), a stylized documentary on Pina Bausch's *Tanztheater Wuppertal*. And, of course, they talk about time and memory, composed and recomposed in static shots and frontal images, in a constantly expanding and overlapping repertoire of experimental films, dramatic features, musical comedies, and documentaries. And ultimately about the tension between the continuity of the shots and the subjects and the discontinuity of the history underlying them.

Eight years, two long fictions (and one seven-minute short), two feature documentaries (and one video "mise-en-scène" for public television), three installations, and one novella after Chantal Akerman by Chantal Akerman came into the world, the filmmaker's self-portrait remains uncannily faithful to its subject. Not because the works repeat themselves but, on the contrary, because each one is the product of a Sisyphus-like attempt to explain the inexplicable, to find the definitively missing links and fill in the irreparable gaps. An effort that, like the peeling of potatoes in *Jeanne Dielman*, the endless waiting lines in *D'Est* (From the East, 1993) or the deportation of "dirty" immigrants in *De l'autre côté* (From the Other Side, 2002), is common to her "story" and ours.

At our interview last February, there was no dog—we met at the Paris office of Paulo Branco, the producer of *La Captive* (1999) and her new "musical tragicomedy," *Demain on déménage* (Tomorrow We Move), which premiered in France last month—but as in her self-portrait, Chantal Akerman, dressed in a dark jacket and pants, came into the room and sat down directly in front of me. In the succession of "attempts" to talk about her work that followed, what came out—with difficulty—reinforces the impression that in fact each film, each installation, each book could be called Chantal Akerman by Chantal Akerman. The interview was no exception. And that's the truth.—MR

MIRIAM ROSEN: Your Centre Pompidou retrospective lends itself to an overall view, but it's not easy to find an angle from which to approach your work. All of a sudden, I thought of the notion of the frontalière, the border crosser or, perhaps better, border dweller. What's interesting about this is not solely geographical, because you're always on the border between various domains of creativity, various genres, various media . . .

CHANTAL AKERMAN: That's so vast.

MR: But everyone finds something different in your work, which doesn't quite fit together as a whole—and yet, you're a single person.

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CA: Yes, one poor little person!

MR: And that's why this notion of "border dweller" interests me: That is where you touch down.

CA: Actually, you should write about me without speaking to me. That would be better. It's true, I made *From the Other Side*, which is, of course, a documentary about Mexicans crossing the border. I've made plenty of things that had to do with that. And one could say that I'm on the border between so-called experimental film and narrative film and that I travel from one to the other. And I'm here, but I could be elsewhere. But I've already spoken about all that.

MR: Texts are everywhere in your films. This goes back to *Je tu il elle*, with the text that you write in the bedroom while eating sugar.

CA: Yes, because *Je tu il elle* was initially a short story.

MR: Did you plan to publish it?

CA: No, it was for me. And afterward, I wanted to make it into a movie, but it was written as a short story, not as a screenplay. *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* [1978] was also written as a text, not as a screenplay. And *Nuit et jour* [Night and Day, 1991] was a short story at first. Afterward, I developed it into a screenplay.

Now it's a little harder to get money. Now I'm obliged to write screenplays because otherwise I won't be given money. Because otherwise I'll be told that it's literary, it's theatrical, I don't know what, but not cinema. Which is too bad because writing a screenplay—"Summer, a small bedroom at night"—doesn't offer the same pleasure. You write the most succinct descriptions possible and then dialogue and that's it. Before, when I wrote texts, I at least had the pleasure of writing a text.

MR: The text is like a mark in time, while someone's reading, and afterward.

CA: When you read a text, you're on your own time. That is not the case in film. In fact, in film, you're dominated by my time. But time is different for everyone. Five minutes isn't the same thing for you as it is for me. And five minutes sometimes seems long, sometimes seems short.

Take a specific film, say, *D'Est*: I imagine the way each viewer experiences time is different. And on my end, when I edit, the timing isn't done just any way. I draw it out to the point where we have to cut.

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Or take another example, *News from Home*: How much time should we take to show this street so that what's happening is something other than a mere piece of information? So that we can go from the concrete to the abstract and come back to the concrete—or move forward in another way. I'm the one who decides. At times I've shot things and I've said, "Now this is getting unbearable!" And I'll cut. For *News from Home* it's something else, but I have a hard time explaining it. I'm in the middle of writing a book about all this, and I'm finding it very difficult to explain. Today I'll write about time—I write more or less every day because I have very little time to do it—and it's too soon.

When you're editing, something happens that tells you this is the moment to cut. It's not theoretical, it's something I feel. Afterward, explaining it is always very difficult. In the beginning, especially with Jeanne Dielman, a lot of people thought I was a great theoretician. Quite the contrary. Later, when people would meet me, they'd realize that. Everyone thought, for example, that Jeanne Dielman was in real time, but the time was totally recomposed, to give the impression of real time. There I was with Delphine [Seyrig], and I told her, "When you put down the Wiener schnitzels like that, do it more slowly. When you take the sugar, move your arm forward more quickly." Only dealing with externals. When she asked why, I'd say, "Do it, and you'll see why later." I didn't want to manipulate her. I showed her afterward and said to her, "You see, I don't want it to 'look real,' I don't want it to look natural, but I want people to feel the time that it takes, which is not the time that it really takes." But I only saw that after Delphine did it. I hadn't thought of it before.

That's for gestures, actions, let's say. There's also the case of static shots where nothing happens, like in *Hôtel Monterey* [1972], where you see a hallway and nothing else. How long will we hold this shot of the hallway? In the montage, you can feel it. Obviously, it's very personal, because someone else would have held it half as long or three times as long. How do you explain that? You have to be very, very calm. When I edit, when I sense that I'm at the quarter mark or halfway through the film, I begin to screen it for myself, with my editor, Claire Atherton, with whom I've worked for years—almost by osmosis. We close the curtains, take the phones off the hook, and try to have a floating gaze, as an analyst might call it. And we say, "That's it!" Why? It's inexplicable. And that's why it's difficult for me to talk about it.

MR: You've said, "To make a film, you still have to write," but perhaps it should be, "In order for me to make a film . . ."

CA: No, no. It's not for me; it's because you have to ask for money. But that suits me, in fact. It's good for me [in English in original]. Because the minute I start writing, I like it. But for the documentaries now, they want it to be more and more defined, and I absolutely cannot define things. So I circle around it. I write around the film, around the hole, let's say, or around the void. Because I want to go make a documentary without knowing what I'm doing. They always demand,

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“Tell us what you’re going to do.” And all I can tell you is that I just don’t know. It’s precisely because of this lack of knowledge that there can be a film.

MR: On the question of time, I’d have thought that today people would be more used to your way of working. It doesn’t conform to the norm of dominant cinema, but it embodies what’s most normal and most human.

CA: You know, when most people go to the movies, the ultimate compliment—for them—is to say, “We didn’t notice the time pass!” With me, you see the time pass. And feel it pass. You also sense that this is the time that leads toward death. There’s some of that, I think. And that’s why there’s so much resistance. I took two hours of someone’s life.

MR: But we’ve experienced those two hours, instead of sitting in a traffic jam or in front of the TV.

CA: Yes, I agree. And not only that. I find that, on the contrary, during this time, we feel our existence. Just by the fact that we’re somewhere beyond the merely informative. For example, in *D’Est*, we see people standing in line, and the shot lasts seven or eight minutes. Now, whenever my mother sees news about Russia she says, “I couldn’t help but think of your film. I’ll never see news about Russia in the same way again.” That’s something. For people of my mother’s generation, they recognize themselves in the film; for example, in *D’Est* she recognizes clothes she used to wear, she recognizes faces. These images exist in her already. When I made the film I—who was born after the war—often wondered why I shot this and not that. I didn’t know. But afterward, when the film was finished, I understood that those particular images were already in my head, and I was looking for them.

I’m speaking here of what we call documentaries. In all these so-called documentary films, there are always different layers. These are just people waiting for a bus, but they still evoke other things. They may evoke the lines in the camps or in wartime. In *Sud* [South, 1999], a tree evokes a black man who might have been hanged. If you show a tree for two seconds, this layer won’t be there—there will just be a tree. It’s time that establishes that, too, I think.

MR: Another characteristic of your films lies in the musicality of the languages. Not simply the reading of letters, say, or the very written dialogues, but the sound of your voice. In French, in English, in Hebrew with the installation *Bordering on Fiction: D’Est* [1995], and now in Spanish with *From the Other Side*. I get the impression there’s a whole story there as well.

CA: Well, this is the story of the mother tongue, which one either has or doesn’t have. I’m first-generation Belgian. My mother arrived from Poland when she was ten. There’s a certain music in the Polish language that lurks behind her French—increasingly so, as she gets older.

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She drops articles like *le* and *la*. For example, she now says, “I am going to doctor,” as you would in Polish. I was also raised with Hebrew, with the songs and prayers, and when I write, there’s something of a chant about it.

MR: I heard it while reading and rereading your novella *Une Famille à Bruxelles* [A Family in Brussels, 1998]: the syntax is very spare, and all of a sudden I realized that it’s like biblical Hebrew, with the repetition—and, and, and!

CA: And God said . . . and . . . and . . . and. It came out that way, yes. When I was small, it was a mixture of my mother’s French and the synagogue, because my grandfather took care of me, and he didn’t speak French and we always went to the synagogue.

MR: Do you speak Yiddish too?

CA: Well, I understood it, but I’ve forgotten almost all of it. I forgot it because I was taken out of the Maimonides School at the age of nine, when my grandfather died. Nevertheless I think that I was definitively marked by Hebrew, Yiddish, and all that.

And then my language is very poor; I have a very restricted vocabulary. Deleuze explains this very well when he speaks of Kafka’s language and minor literature. There are no big car accidents, no big effects, everything is very, very, very, very tight.

MR: I think if you scratch the surface a little, almost everyone is minor.

CA: Not in France.

MR: Yes, in France, precisely. If you scratch.

CA: There’s an enormous amount of people who are not border dwellers, first of all. There are still people who belong to this quote-unquote “land” and to this language. There are still “French people.”

In the United States—in New York, in any case, and in other places, too—there are people who come from countries all over the world. You don’t feel bad speaking bad English. Whereas in France or in Belgium—for example, on my first school paper, the teacher wrote, “colloquial.” I went to a “high-class” high school, and I never felt like I belonged. I was made to feel that in various ways, and particularly because of my way of speaking.

In New York, everyone knew that I came from France or from Belgium, but I felt at ease.

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MR: Why did you choose New York when you were twenty-one?

CA: It was just a desire, like that. I don't know anymore. I had the impression things were happening there, but I had no idea. I knew a few words of English, very few, when I arrived. I learned to get by rather quickly, and I never felt that I spoke badly. Here in France, yes. That's why I say there are "French people." In New York, I felt relieved of the weight of not belonging. And at the same time, I felt that I didn't belong. But that was part of the pleasure. Here, not belonging is not a pleasure.

MR: But if you remain in foreign territory, where you have to speak properly, the decision to adapt Proust for your film *La Captive* is hardly anodyne. You once remarked that "this book was made for my cinema"—that was in the magazine *Les Inrockuptibles*—but with all the declensions of these languages, with your voice, with accents or without them, isn't it also a way of saying, "I am here," working with an icon of French literature?

CA: No, I don't think it was to prove that I had access to real French literature. For me, when I saw the hallways, the bedrooms, and all that in Proust's *The Captive*, I said, that's for me!

MR: We've discussed time and space, the editing of your films, texts and languages, and installations. But we haven't spoken about the image.

CA: Most of the time I make an image head on. I don't think that a frontal image is idolatrous, because it's a face-to-face with the other. But I realized that later, not at the beginning. The other will be in my place when they're sitting in the movie theater. Which is the same thing one could say about time: We sense time, so we sense ourselves. Face to face with an image, we sense ourselves. We are always on the outside when it comes to the other. Proust, when he speaks of kissing his grandmother, says, "But I was only kissing the exterior!" That really struck me.

It's this exteriority that is under examination in my films. It's the same thing with time, because the other doesn't have the same experience of time. His own time comes into play, and his perspective comes into play, and it's a gaze directly at you. Which cannot be denied. So that's not voyeurism. If you looked up, down, to the side, etc., you would be a viewer-voyeur. And that's not happening here.

MR: In the last part of the installation *D'Est*, there was a lone video monitor, and one heard your voice reciting the second commandment, which, of course, forbids graven images. That surprised me, because you speak of it as if this prohibition really concerns you.

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CA: Yes, but that came later, when I had already made a lot of films. All of a sudden, I thought of that, and I said to myself, if I make images like this, en face, then it's not idolatrous. But, anyway, these are explanations after the fact.

MR: If I'm not mistaken, you never shoot your own images but always use a camera operator—from the beginning all the way to *From the Other Side*, in which you employed a mix of media, including your own small digital-video camera. Nonetheless, it's curious that, given the one-woman band that you are, you don't operate the camera yourself.

CA: That's true, but I'm always very close to the image. I'm the one who does the framing. I may not have pushed the button, but I did the lighting.

MR: Finally, to return to "minor literature," which you spoke about in an interview over twenty-five years ago, here's a question that I have today: With this retrospective at the Centre Pompidou and everything that surrounds it, the fact of being featured at Beaubourg and exhibited at the Marian Goodman Gallery, you are no longer really "minor." How does that realization sit with you?

CA: You mean, I'm becoming part of the establishment?

MR: No, I don't think you're becoming part of the establishment, but getting that kind of recognition changes your relationship to the world.

CA: Yes, but I don't feel it. Frankly, I don't feel it. I know that I have to work, I have to go on. When I passed Beaubourg the other day, I saw Sophie Calle's name displayed in big letters, and I said to myself, "Hey, will my name be in big letters like that?" And then, well, I thought about something else.