

No Idolatry and Losing Everything that Made You a Slave: Chantal Akerman

By Élisabeth Lebovici

Chantal Akerman has addressed themes like otherness and incarceration, starting with her own background and that of her mother, a survivor of the Nazi camps. Otherness is a non-conformity Akerman lives, as a woman and a Jew. Is it possible to bring out the fact that the Other, for itself, is completely Subject? The extraordinary filmography of the artist, who has always called herself directly into play, brilliantly resolves this issue. Élisabeth Lebovici met the artist to talk about these themes and to reinterpret some of her past and recent works.

ÉLISABETH LEBOVICI: If one wants to begin with a loaded introductory statement about Chantal Akerman, one should definitely talk about borders, frontiers, limits, the other side and the side of the Other. These notions are also there in the way you deal with your work, your craft, your profession: are you on the side of experimental filmmaking, or in the history of mainstream narrative cinema? The side of cinema or that of art? Or all of the above? That would be my first question, since you were one of the most prominent filmmakers to “cross over” in the mid-1990s. What do you feel about this crossover towards making art?

CHANTAL AKERMAN: My history with installation was probably not an accident, though it appeared as if it were: it would never have happened without Kathy Halbreich, then the head of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, who asked me if I would do something in a museum context. That was probably in the early 1990s, when the curator Michael Tarantino had repeatedly observed that my films were a major influence on contemporary artists. You know I didn't learn about art. I ran away from school when I was 15. I was never really exposed to exhibitions before the early 1970s, the best years to me, when I found myself in a small group of the New York avant-garde, with Babette Mangolte, Jonas Mekas, Michael Snow, Annette Michelson, whom I respect so much...

Anyway, it happened because of Kathy Halbreich. At the time I was doing *Nuit et jour* [*Night and Day*]. She said she was interested in history, I said I was equally interested in the polyphony of languages. I had been wanting to go towards Eastern Europe for twenty years – and it was just opening up – in order to work with the different Slavic languages, which are distinct but sound quite similar. I wanted to do a work about changes in voices and languages, a project that then developed on its own into a totally different form: while the texture of the soundtrack is very important in *D'Est* [*From the East*], there is not one word in the film. At the beginning I wanted her to produce such a film; I didn't care about the art thing. In the meantime I found money and did *D'Est*. One year later, maybe two, I was told that funds had been raised for an installation, and I began playing around with the film material I had already gathered. It happened when I had three reels of the film, and I was playing with time. I saw four minutes that worked together in these three reels. Why? I don't know. There were four minutes. And then we found eight times four minutes, 24 screens as in 24 images per second; that is how the installation found its own agency. I wrote the last, 25th part as something more visually abstract, but with a very intimate text that evoked something more like a memorial. It also deals with limits, death, the camps. My fixation with borders comes from the camps. When you touch on that limit – and I touched it very

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closely through my mother, who was in the camps but was never able to talk through her anxiety – this border takes on the source of the anxiety, it becomes an “anxious Object”. In *De l’autre côté* [*From the Other Side*], for instance, I show the wall to my mother and ask her what it brings to mind, and she says: “you know what”. When it is internalized, experience is given without speaking, transmitted as a spectral presence; you cannot separate yourself from it. In the film *Là-bas* [*Down There*] the notion of the “Other” takes on more complexity, because it’s the same side, but the other side, the inside too. I try to connect to that internalization, because it’s something you have to live with, that lives there before you. But it’s hard. The reason is that I touched another limit, which is myself.

EL: Talking about borders and confinement, home and breaking loose... Isn’t that what home is about? When one looks at Jeanne Dielman in her kitchen, or when one finds oneself immersed in your last installation, shot in and from your home, the camera is the operator to feel confinement, beyond the visual depiction of space...

CA: The jail is very, very present in all of my work, in *La Captive* [*The Captive*] as well as *Jeanne Dielman*... sometimes not so frontally. Now when you enter America, you have to put all of your fingers in ink, it’s like entering a big jail. Do you know that you cannot smoke anymore in Central Park? New York is not like it was in the 1970s, everything was happening then, now it’s much more about money. France is terrible, you feel no energy at all. In America you still have energy, but mostly for bling.

EL: For you, where does this notion of the other side come from?

CA: From Emmanuel Lévinas. He is part of my culture. For two years I attended his classes at ENIO (École Normale Israélite Orientale): he would always have a young person, a boy or a girl, read an excerpt from the Bible, standing in front of him, a minuscule, fragile figure surrounded by tons of books, and then he would get started and go far, far away... I often quote his statement: “When you see the face of the Other, you already hear the words ‘Thou shalt not kill’”. If only he had been heard. How could I not hear it! The other face is also the face of the viewer, I have always thought: I have an understanding that making films is very much about frontality, about facing off.

EL: The notion of the Other has also been reassessed by feminism, first by Simone de Beauvoir when she observed that “he is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other” – that is, the non-subject, the non-person, in short, the mere body. Being on the other side, then, is also being on the side of the Other, reclaiming the self.

CA: It was such an emancipating time, between 1968 and 1973. I felt free to make *Je, tu, il, elle* [*I, You, He, She*], which was then an incredible provocation. I shot the film in one week, and at first I tried to have another woman play my part, a substitute for my own body.

But I soon realized it had to be me, my body. Just as in *Saute ma ville* [*Blow Up My Town*], which I now think is my queerest movie. *Saute ma ville*, to me, is the opposite of *Jeanne Dielman*: the story of a girl who talks back to her mother, who explodes the norms confining women to womanly tasks, who breaks everything in kitchen and does everything in a crooked way – and yet,

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for all that, it is a love story: the film is dedicated.

EL: I love the way you deal with your own body – defying its sense of gravity as well as its respectability – in *Je, tu, il, elle*, for instance, where after your long journey you finally enter “elle”’s apartment, and the first thing you do is to trip on the carpet and fall down...

CA: I’m a female Charlie Chaplin, I could have made slapstick comedy. I’m thinking more and more about acting again, in my films. My body in a movie is very important, it says something by itself, it has the weight of the Real. I can’t have actresses playing my clumsiness. It seems impossible for me to be in a restaurant without knocking something over: my gestures are too large, or I’m pursuing my thoughts and get startled. You’re out of convention with your own body, with your own way of moving. When I was a child, and being raised in such a conventional bourgeois high school, I thought it was a question of class, I attributed my non-conformity to the fact that I was a Jew. I didn’t attribute it to gender then, but I realized later that the other girls were already built to fit what a young woman was raised to become, in conformity with their future as women in a normative society: my parents didn’t have the time, they didn’t succeed. When I was fifteen and ate too much chocolate, and put on weight, my father suddenly realized that I had to get skinnier to be sold to a man; he wanted me to wear dresses but it didn’t work. When I was 18 I rushed to Paris, then I rushed to New York, to get even farther away. The only person I didn’t succeed in making that split with was my mother, because she was a camp survivor, and I was born when she was older, in 1950. I still think of myself as an old child...

EL: On the other side of gender difference?

CA: Well, for several months I joined the feminist faction of “Psych et Po”, with Antoinette Fouque, which made it normal to expose yourself. But that’s another story...

EL: But you were recruited to film a case history of Freud: was it *Anna O*?

CA: No, it was *The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman*. I was just asked to help, not to do the film myself, and was soon pulled away.

EL: Psychoanalysis is part of your life, but could you film Freud?

CA: I remember that *Dora* was fascinating. But there are so many people who have thought about psychoanalysis after Freud. For instance, there is this theory of André Green, in *Narcissisme de Vie, Narcissisme de Mort* [*Life Narcissism, Death Narcissism*, 1983], about the complex of the dead mother, where he writes about the ways maternal depression abandons the child and his or her craving for being held, comforted, accompanied.

EL: Taking sides with the mother?

CA: At the beginning I thought that since she didn’t have any voice, I would be speaking for her, but it turned out not to be so true, it was just my way of explaining things. What is true is that I was speaking for all women: *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*: what woman

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didn't feel something about that? When *Je, tu, il, elle* was released my telephone was bombarded with calls from people who identified with what I was showing. When a figure appears that has rarely been exposed, it indicates that something was probably boiling.

EL: I have always been struck by the fact that in *Je, tu, il, elle* the performance of sex is there without its reality, as in the scene between two naked women. Not only do you deconstruct heteronormative sex, but in many of your films you also contradict the notion of sexual pleasure as a climax for the psyche. This very much goes with Leo Bersani's notion of the "Freudian Body", which disengages the equation between release of sexual energy and jouissance.

CA: In *Jeanne Dielman* I showed that not having pleasure was her last freedom. If Jeanne had found pleasure in having sex with her client, she would have been surrendering to the men with whom she was working. I had endless discussions with Delphine Seyrig, who said that once you had pleasure, you would want to repeat it... I was only 24 and she was over forty, she was "the subject supposed to know" (Lacan), but I struggled to make her believe me: fighting against pleasure is Jeanne's resistance, it is her way of existing, her jouissance in relation to the obligation of pleasure, which was the doxa at the time I shot the film. From the 1970s on another obligation had come for women, taking the place of choice and freedom. In *Les rendez-vous d'Anna* [*Anna's Meetings*], when the main character (played by Aurore Clément) is in Germany, she tells the guy she's not in love with him, that he has to put his clothes back on. Again, this is resistance to such pleasure obligation.

EL: Your body returns in the installation *Maniac Summer*, 2009, which I saw at Marian Goodman in Paris (2010); but not as a prevalent image, not as the center. It is night, and a ghostly image appears on just one of the three screens of the installation, doing things, office work, at the computer, on the phone. Then, on the two other screens placed on two other walls, we see a park with children, and a courtyard viewed from a Parisian apartment...

CA: I did this first part at random, just putting the camera beside me and forgetting about it, doing whatever I was doing. Then I moved the camera to my window, shot a little bit outside, organizing a landscape that was almost unrecognizable. It was more of an orphan film, without subject, object, author... *Maniac Summer* is very much about the other side of the figure, about abstraction. I had heard someone talking about Hiroshima, and it had made a great impression. The intense radiation of the blast left afterimages on walls, shadows of the bodies of people who were standing there, in the instant before they fell. I found the idea of these traces of death very moving, and tried to go forward with that idea in video, which was complicated as a medium for this kind of transformation: when the image falls, what stays on the walls afterwards? It falls into abstraction. Hiroshima is the landmark for the second half of the 20th century. I was born in 1950, this is my time. There are still things to be done about that century. As for the new century, I think we still don't understand what is going on, at least for the moment. Did you read Jean-Claude Milner's *Les penchants criminels de l'Europe démocratique*? It's an extraordinary book, using the texts of Benjamin and Gershom Sholem, and trying to demonstrate how for Modern Europe the name "Jew" was thought of as a problem to solve. Milner explains that beyond all discourse, Europe would not have constructed its unification without the death of the Jews, without the extermination camps.

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EL: Your present, however, is the 21st century: you are doing a retrospective at MuHKA, in Antwerp, and then there is *La folie Almayer* [*Almayer's Folly*], your latest feature film, based on a novel by Joseph Conrad.

CA: Not exactly. There is one chapter at the end of the novel that broke my heart, when the girl, the female protagonist, is running away. I read that chapter, and that same night I saw *Tabu* by Murnau and it clicked, you see. That's why I decided to do the film, thanks to one chapter of *Almayer's Folly* and *Tabu*, because of the simplicity of that film, where Murnau was able to say such emotional things with almost nothing. My film is about the relationship of a father and his daughter. The father goes mad because he loses her. He is a very weak character, and I saw that as a challenge. My cousin in Toronto told me that in America they would never accept a weak man as the main character, so in a way it is also about gender definitions.

EL: You live in New York, you have a job at CUNY. What are you teaching?

CA: I'm not teaching, I'm helping graduate students with their thesis projects, which consist in making films. I push them to improve their scripts, to improve their work with actors and sets, so in a way I'm like a good producer, one who interferes a lot. I enjoy doing it and I'm very moved when suddenly some kind of clarity emerges. But there's a lot of ignorance of cinema. When I ask, "did you see *All About Eve*?", many of the students have no idea who Mankiewicz was. One of the students wanted to make a film about a band, which is an iconic theme in America, so I told him he had to see *Chronik der Anna Magdalena Bach* [*The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*] by Straub-Huillet, which would show him how to shoot a band. That's what I'm fighting against. Did you know that the school where I'm teaching is the one that gave Hannah Arendt a position after she fled from Europe? When Arendt came to America, there was a quota at Harvard regarding the number of Jews who could attend the university or be part of its faculty. Such quotas were abolished only in the 1960s. So all the Jews went to CUNY and donated money there, as well. That's how I got the job. I always end up talking about what happened when the Jews fled from Egypt: it took them forty years – or three generations, in those days – to forget all the signs of slavery. Forty years, the space for oblivion, in order to be released from that bondage and to enter Israel. That's why I think Pessah, or Exodus, is one of the most important books about slavery. Many countries in Africa didn't get that time of forgetting, and the people who came out of the camps in Europe didn't have such time either. If I put myself into a kind of prisoner situation, it is because my mother gave that to me. She didn't have the forty years, either. That's why the Genesis is the most important book in the world: because of the Exodus, because of idolatry, too. For me the crucial issues are: no idolatry and losing everything that made you a slave.

EL: What is your next project?

CA: I have a gap in my hearing ability. High notes are getting a bit imprecise. I would like to make a film that describes all the effects of this. High pitches are the ones that help us to precisely locate sound sources. I would like to write about it. Blindness is very romantic, it already has its place in literature, in the great myths, first and foremost that of Oedipus, of course. This is not true of deafness. I would like to underline the effects of this impairment.

M A R I A N G O O D M A N G A L L E R Y

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