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CHANTAL AKERMAN INTERVIEW, CHICAGO

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# CHANTAL AKERMAN INTERVIEW, CHICAGO: 1976/2016

## B. Ruby Rich

I first met Chantal Akerman in 1974 at the legendary Belgian film festival EXPRMNTL (International Festival of Experimental Cinema of Knokke-le-Zoute). The festival had been founded by Jacques Ledoux, who was also the head curator of the Royal Film Archive of Belgium (*Cinémathèque royale de Belgique*) where he would serve, for forty years, until his death in 1988. While it has been said that Ledoux supported Akerman's work—and surely his Polish origins and experimental film tastes make such an affiliation likely—in fact her films were rejected from the EXPRMNTL that year. She was there, she told me, to see the official selections, the films that had been deemed more worthy.<sup>1</sup>

A mere two years later, Akerman would tour the United States in triumph with her celebrated breakthrough film, *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (*Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels*, 1975). She came to Chicago at my invitation for a screening at the Film Center, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, on November 19, 1976. I was working as a curator there, and she stayed with me and my then-partner in our parachute-bedecked guest room in a loft on the eighth floor of the legendary Palatine Building.

Six floors below was the loft of my friends and neighbors Kate Horsfield and Lyn Blumenthal, who had recently launched the Video Data Bank and were busily shooting a start-up collection of video interviews with artists, emphasizing women. Using their new state of the art, black and white Portapak camera, Horsfield shot and recorded an interview with Chantal that I conducted. Somehow there was only one cassette, so the interview ends rather abruptly after fifty minutes when the tape runs out and no other can be found; it was conducted in the tiny office/studio of the VDB in downtown Chicago.

A few things need to be understood before immersion in this voice from the archive. First, consider that Akerman was just becoming known at the time: even cinephiles did

not yet know her name. Her earlier work had not been shown or written about in the United States, and had barely been given any attention at all. She was simultaneously lucky and unlucky to make her most famous and acclaimed film at the age of 24, a masterpiece that defined her career and also shadowed her many other brilliant accomplishments. This interview, therefore, represents what is very much a getting-to-know-you conversation, for there was little available to read about her at that date, nothing about the earlier work, and pre-internet, no access to any of it.

Also, consider the context. However unlikely it may seem today, *Jeanne Dielman* was being taken up as a feminist manifesto, analyzed in study groups, and held up as a case in point for multiple interventions and discourses regarding what a radical feminist aesthetic might look like onscreen. There was a great yearning to define a feminist film aesthetic, and *Jeanne Dielman* fit the bill so very perfectly that it was championed in arguments that spread like wildfire. This instrumental use of the film, eventually, would set Akerman off on her lifelong refusal to “belong” to any such group or to have her films conscripted into anyone's agendas; but in the beginning, she was not so adamant and in fact seems to welcome such interpretations. A similar fate awaited her earlier film *Je tu il elle* (1974): once it was screened, it was taken up as a paradigmatic lesbian work, much to her chagrin, especially since she starred in it herself and soon grew embarrassed about that performance. In this early conversation, she acknowledges the film's autobiographical roots, blaming her youth and her immaturity when she wrote the script years earlier, and hilariously insisting that its subject matter isn't important.

I suspect that her reluctance to have her work claimed for either feminist or lesbian purposes might also have had something to do with a group famous in Paris at the time. The rise of the French women's movement—the *Mouvement de Liberation des Femmes* or *MLF*—was characterized by numerous rival political formations. The most powerful was *Psychanalyse et politique*, centered around its charismatic leader, the psychoanalyst Antoinette Fouque. This group, dubbed *Psych-et-pol*, had its own publishing house and

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bookstore, but became notorious when it tried to copyright MLF as its own trademark. Chatting with me one evening, Chantal mentioned that they'd approached her once to make a film with them; shrugging, she said simply, "I think it's better not to."

Chantal was certainly a figure to champion: tiny, impossibly young, full of passion and genius, and, as rumor already had it at the time, a lesbian. Certainly, she went on to center her life around women and a selection of exceptional male collaborators. Foremost were her mother and aunts, whom she so often referenced and who deeply influenced her work. There was Delphine Seyrig, whom she'd meet for breakfast day after day, week after week, until her death from cancer at the age of 58.<sup>2</sup> There was her longtime producer, Marilyn Watelet, first glimpsed that week in Chicago when she flew over from Brussels to stay at my loft with Chantal; her longtime editor, Claire Atherton; and of course, her life partner, the cellist Sonia Wieder-Atherton, who so deeply influenced her life and cinema.

For me, as her host and interviewer during that week long ago in Chicago, this interview was an attempt to champion her example and to try to get the auteur herself to unpack some of the meanings and referents of *Jeanne Dielman*, her singular work, as well as to put it into the context of her own development; for Akerman, the performance of such acts of interpretation was something she would repudiate consistently across the years. That's your job, she would chastise her interlocutors, whether critics or audience members, arguing that her job was to make the films, not explain them. Here, not yet so guarded, she sometimes gives in and provides interesting information, some familiar from later years, some strikingly new.

This interview, then, offers a glimpse of a very young Chantal Akerman in the process, essentially, of becoming herself. Here, in print for the first time, is that text.<sup>3</sup>

**B RUBY RICH: Let's begin with your decision to shoot your first film (*Saute ma ville* [*Blow Up My Town*], 1968) in 35mm.**

CHANTAL AKERMAN: Yes, but I was kind of crazy. Not crazy, exactly, but I thought that if I make a short film, I can show it to anyone and it will help me.

**RICH: How old were you when you made it?**

AKERMAN: Eighteen. But, in fact, when you make a film in black and white and when you do only one night of shooting, it's almost the same [cost] to make it in 35mm as in 16mm. So that's why I did it. I had the opportunity to have a camera almost for free.

**RICH: How did you get the equipment? Were you in school, or did you know somebody?**

AKERMAN: I was in school, but I rented it for, like, \$10 for the night. So, you can always find \$10.

**RICH: What is the film about? What is it like?**

AKERMAN: In some ways, it's the opposite of *Jeanne Dielman*. Not exactly, but it has something to do [with that] . . . you know that [scene] in *Jeanne Dielman*? I'll make you a circle.<sup>4</sup> [She gestures] I was acting in it and it's me in the kitchen doing things, but they are all [wrong] . . . you know, like when I open the water, the water comes into my face, and things like that—a bit like a tragicomedy. And after that, I commit suicide. (Laughs.) No, but it's all at the same level and very fast like that. That's about it.

**RICH: Did you make *Hotel Monterey* [1972] after that?**

AKERMAN: Yes . . . no. When I made that, it was in '68. But I didn't finish the editing, I didn't finish the song. You know, doing the shoot—when it's one day—is almost easier than finding an editing machine, mixing; you know, to mix you have to have someone else. So I waited another year to do the mixing and the song editing, and after that, it stayed in the lab because I didn't have the money to pay [the bill]. And finally the lab called me after two years: I had to pick up the film and I had to pay. So we made an arrangement and I got the film.

Because at that point in time, I left Brussels, I went to Paris, and I just hung around. I didn't film. I didn't know if I would be able to make another one. And someone showed the film on the TV, and that was the beginning of something else—because it started to exist.

And the second film was a film that I just don't like.<sup>5</sup> The first film was not formalist at all . . . well, the song was a little bit; but I just [did it], knowing nothing. But in the second film, which I made three years after the first one, I had already started to think about the form, but I didn't integrate my thinking. So it's already in long-shot, because I had already started to think about editing and the manipulation of the editing. But it's not stylized inside, you know, the actors are improvising, which I hate now, but at the time I didn't know what was wrong. And when they do improvise, they want to be *verist*—you know *verist*? Like *verité*—

**RICH: Realistic?**

AKERMAN: No, *verist*.



**Rich: Naturalistic?**

AKERMAN: (*Nodding*) They wanted to be natural, and they wanted to do [i.e., add] many things to the subject to make it more natural—and you just lose the point, you know? I didn't know I had to organize what they have to do in the shot, so that

the shot has some rhythm. So it was very mild, you know, nothing in it. And the subject was the day of a woman, and she's a bit bourgeois, and the holidays, and suddenly the child disappears. And she's looking in all these places to find the child. But she wasn't really. Things like that.

**Rich: Was your first feature, then, *Je tu il elle*?**

AKERMAN: Yeah, the first feature. I had made *Hotel Monterey* here (*pointing to her head*). You want me to talk about the other film? I was desperate because the [second] film was so bad. And I thought—because I liked the first film—I thought I just did it by chance, because it was the first one. I thought I'd like to make films, which you think for a few years . . . [then] discover that you're not. It's really annoying, let's say. So I came here [to the United States] and saw some other films, in New York. And it was there that I learned about tension in film, and things like that, which I didn't know.

**Rich: What films did you see there?**

AKERMAN: A lot of films that were at Anthology Film Archives: Stan Brakhage, Michael Snow, Andy Warhol, George Landow, some Hollis Frampton, too. And I discovered that you can make a film without narrative or point of view. It's strange, it was really a relief in some ways. Now, I only want to make narrative films; but at the time, it was like a liberation. So I made that film *Hotel Monterey*. It's not true that it's totally *not* a narrative, because it has a sense of continuity, you know, it starts at the beginning on the main floor and finishes at the roof. It starts at night and finishes at dawn.

**Rich: You made *Hotel Monterey* when you were still in New York and before you returned to Paris?**

AKERMAN: Yes, the hotel is in New York.

**Rich: Did you always feel that you were evolving from making these sorts of personal films to making a feature, a film that would be shown in a theater? Did you always have that in mind?**

AKERMAN: It was not so precise, no. I was just walking from one thing to another without any big goal.

**Rich: When did you make *Je tu il elle*? What is it like?<sup>6</sup>**

AKERMAN: I made *Je tu il elle* in 1974, but it's based on a story I had written in '68 or '69, something like that. And it's very personal. It is not autobiographical, because it is very structured; but it has some elements that I really experienced when I was younger—because, you know, I had written it in '68 [*when she was a teenager*] . . . It's a film in three parts and it's about a woman who was me, an adolescent in fact. I am playing the adolescent . . . It's like three different trips. And the first part is in a room. In the second part I leave the room and take a trip with a truck driver. And in the third part, I see a woman who was my friend [lover] before, and I stay with her for the night. But you know, the subject matter is not so important. Let's say, it's more like . . . I don't know, it's hard to explain because that film was not “conceptual” like *Jeanne Dielman*. In fact, I did that film exactly like I had done the first one, without thinking too much about it.

**Rich: Do you feel that *Jeanne Dielman* is the first film in which you really felt that the narrative and the form and the emotion all fit together in the way that you wanted?**

AKERMAN: Yeah, exactly.

**Rich: I know that because of its subject matter—the housework, her being a prostitute, and because of the murder—there's been a lot of feminist attention and a lot of reaction from women. Has it been what you would have expected, or has it been different from what you intended? I am curious about that.**

AKERMAN: The response?

**Rich: Yes, to *Jeanne Dielman*. In France or in Belgium, I don't know which.**

AKERMAN: I didn't know exactly what the response would be. You know, when you make it, you just make it. After it was finished, when I saw the complete film, I said: Oh my god, people will not be willing to stay! Because it is very difficult for me to imagine what they are waiting to see in a film in a commercial theater. I didn't know . . .

**Rich: But you weren't thinking at all sociologically when making the film?**

AKERMAN: I explained this to the audience two days ago.<sup>7</sup> We had first written another script, Marilyn and me, and that one was much more sociological. That means, with ideas; that we knew what we were saying, in fact. But we couldn't find any ending, because we needed to find a sociological end that was reasonable, and we didn't know how to



do that. And after awhile, it was becoming a moral problem: who are we to find an ending for the problem of a woman, of a 45-year old woman? In fact, we are not in her skin . . . And we realized that we wanted to express one idea after another, so we had to find a scene to cover the idea. And after awhile we didn't know what to do with that kind of [approach] . . . and when I had written that one, I didn't know what I had written, really I didn't know. You know . . . I knew that she would be a prostitute—that I knew—and that covers some [of our] ideas, that she was a housewife, a prostitute, but that's about it.

The other thing is that I had really written [the script] almost without thinking what that covers. I knew that it was very strong inside of me because of the image I have from my childhood. You know, my mother, my aunt—it was more *that* than covering some ideas from some sociological point of view.

**RICH: So the selection of the different kinds of rituals that Seyrig enacts is more from your observation than from any kind of Freudian theory?**

AKERMAN: Exactly, exactly. But you didn't understand the words and they are important . . . With the second client, something's happening, and you understand from the beginning and from what she says that she had never had pleasure, and you can understand what can happen with a man . . . it was an orgasm, for me, even though I don't show it, that provokes all the little things that happen afterwards. It's not a Freudian explanation—because everybody told me, you know, that when you have one, you want to have another one. But for me, in her situation, the fact to *not* have an orgasm was her last strength, you know, the last space of freedom, that she didn't let . . . you know, the last space of freedom [was] to *not* have that orgasm. And because she had it, because she was too weak to not have it . . . Everything was falling apart afterwards.

**RICH: So for her it's meant to be more of a defeat than a freedom coming?**

AKERMAN: It's not so square as that. I don't consider that to have an orgasm is always the best thing. It's not like Reich: fucking, have an orgasm, and that's it.<sup>8</sup> I don't know if that's exactly what Reich said, that everything will be all right, the theory of pleasure . . . so I don't know if that covers any other theory, but that's what I really feel. That's why so many women don't have pleasure, because they protect some space, unconsciously.

**RICH: I like your explanation. Because I had heard opinions about what would cause her then to start to**

**break down and I was troubled that it sounded too much like the kind of cliché of "yes, all she needs is a good fuck." And I found it very hard to justify that explanation.**

AKERMAN: Oh no, it's just the contrary, just the contrary. Because I don't think it was a better fuck than all the others, it's just that she let it happen—because you are the one who decides in your head if it is going to happen or not, nobody else. I think so. A man can be as good a fuck as he wants, if you . . .

**RICH: I found that the color in the film kept its tension a lot, that the house and life were very sterilized, but that the color was very sensual. Did you mean for the color to work that way for the audience?**

AKERMAN: I didn't want an impressionist kind of light. I wanted it very precise and very rich. In fact, lights coming from above . . .

**RICH: From the sources?**

AKERMAN: Yes. And that is not supposed to be the nicest way to light a woman, you know what I mean? Because it's better to be lit like that (*she gestures to the side*) and she had just a little bit like that (*a fill light*) so she wouldn't have blackness here (*she points under her eyes*). That's what I wanted, because that's how it is in houses, and not . . . impressionistic. And for the color to be strong. But I didn't know that it would give that effect. I just didn't want the contrary effect.

**RICH: I noticed the stills from the film give a completely different feeling because of being in black and white.**

AKERMAN: They are very bad, very cheap stills. They are taken from the film, from the negative, not some stills that someone has taken during the shooting. It's from the negative of the film from outtakes . . . but it's not well printed.

**RICH: I didn't mean that! Just that seeing them, I realized that the film would have been much more tragic or grim or had a cinema vérité kind of feel if it had been black and white.**

AKERMAN: Maybe Bergman! (*Laughs.*) You know, I saw some rushes of the film in black and white, and in some ways I was frightened by the color.

**RICH: Why?**

AKERMAN: I don't know. I can't say. Because in the beginning when I saw some rushes in black and white and some rushes in color, I don't know . . . it made me think strange things . . .



I was frightened by the color because it was getting so real in some ways. And black and white is kind of . . .

**Rich: Softer?**

AKERMAN: Yeah, less powerful. I cannot explain it in English. And also

it's a distance that I didn't need, because the style of the film was enough of a distance.

**Rich: How did you work with Delphine? How much of the style that she uses is her own and how much is one that you had in mind?**

AKERMAN: It's hard to really find the line, but we worked a lot with video. We were doing the rehearsals with video. Because at the beginning, she thought—because I didn't want her doing more than she had done in the film, and all actors are used to trying to be natural, like I said before—that she was not bringing me anything. So we started to use video [for playback] and I explained to her when she saw herself what I wanted. Because I said: one gesture is more than if you do ten thousand that will help you to think you are natural.

In fact, she understood right away. Everything was written, almost everything. She brings a lot. All the gestures that are not usually in the script were written. And she said, "I don't have anything to do; everything is written! Usually I have to find all those things that you have written." So at the beginning she was a little bit frustrated, but finally she found her own way to be extraordinary using what I had written. It's hard! She found a way to move. She doesn't move like that at all usually in life, and not in the films. Her body . . . I cannot explain . . . she brought how she moves and uses her body. *Alors*, anyway . . . [for] the last shot when she makes love with the man and when she has her own kind of orgasm with him, we were discussing what the meaning was for us, what it was for me, what it was for her, and finally she found a way to express it in the way you see. It's hard to explain because it's every little detail and a lot of talk, and being together.

**Rich: This is the love-making in the last scene, with the last man? That was terrifying to me, more than a horror film.**

AKERMAN: It was terrifying! And I was almost not able to direct it. She said, "You want to do it again?" I said "No!" I couldn't stand it. And my mother was there, and she said, "Oh, poor Delphine."

**Rich: Your mother?**

AKERMAN: She came to see the shooting—just at that time. (*Laughs.*)

**Rich: Did you discuss the film at all with your mother?**

AKERMAN: She loved the film. Yeah. She loved the film. And when we were doing the shooting, once we brought some tapes and a TV [monitor] and showed her the rehearsal of Delphine eating some tartine, and also the scene when she makes the meat. And she said, "Oh, that poor woman, alone in that kitchen." (*Laughs.*) Things like that. She felt it very strongly. We didn't discuss the scenes.

**Rich: But did you take a lot from your mother?**

AKERMAN: *C'est transposé*. It's "transposed." But it has some part of my mother, for sure. She recognized herself in some parts. When she saw all the corridor shots—we did them all at once, and she came to see the rushes—she said, "Oh, it's exactly like me when I walk into the house and I don't know what to do with myself; but only, in my place I have a staircase." Things like that. But I can't say that it's her, I cannot, not at all. And not anymore anyway, because she is not a housewife anymore. She works, and always goes to restaurants, and doesn't really make food anymore. She can't even do that so well anymore.

**Rich: I don't know what people have said about the use of prostitution in it, but in Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, she includes lots of letters from women in the nineteenth century writing to lovelorn columns and talking about their marriage responsibility, and the sexuality is talked about really like prostitution, talking about their obligation to their husband in the bed like in the kitchen.**

AKERMAN: Sure. I know, I know.

**Rich: Were you thinking about that when choosing that?**

AKERMAN: Sure. Not about that book, but . . .

(*There is a sudden interruption due to a microphone malfunction.*)

AKERMAN: Is it okay?

**Rich: I was just asking about the attitude of women . . . towards marriage itself as a kind of prostitution. Did you have that feeling? Did you see the prostitution as a more extreme way of depicting sexuality in general?**

AKERMAN: Yes. In some ways. In marriage, anyway. Some feminists say that right now you cannot make love with a man without prostituting yourself. I don't know about that. I'm not sure, I don't know about that. And they also say that you are always raped. But that I don't know. I can't tell. But in marriage, it seems to be evident, for most women.



**RICH: I hadn't realized when seeing it what the cause of the murder would be, how much it was related to the sexuality. And you were talking a bit about how you meant for the murder to really be more on the same level with the other actions. Can you talk a little bit about the ending?**

AKERMAN: Yes, I can say some things. In fact, a lot of people were approaching me about the murder for different reasons. Some were approaching me because they say, "Oh, it's symbolic. She kills the man to survive. Every woman must kill the man to survive." So to them I have to answer that it's their problem—because if they see that in the symbolic way, which I didn't mean, it's their own problem with women. That's one thing.

**RICH: Was it mostly men who would say this?**

AKERMAN: Yeah, mostly men. They were offended by that. Some other people were saying it more from a formal point of view, which seemed to be more appropriate. In fact, I wanted that murder, you know, that's one thing. I have written it like that. It was logical for me. It was not just to finish the film; the film was built like that. But I just want to answer, when people approach me for such and such a reason, you know, so I can answer about that reason, but not *why* I want it. I just knew I wanted it. The people who approach me for formal reasons, they say, "Yes, murder is used in commercial things. It is one of main things in commercial films, even: violence and sex."

I think it's true that they have a lot of murder in films, but they don't have a woman doing the dishes. It's like [they think that] when you show a woman doing the dishes, you cannot show a murder, because it's not supposed to go together. And I think it's really going together very well. I show the same intensity [in] the murder and the way she washes the dishes. So that's not a good reason.

And also, if I didn't create that murder, it's like a lot of films that just finish with that kind of subtle feeling, that it will just be a circle. And I think that's a really cliché kind of ending, that kind of sensitive end. I didn't want that at all. I think everything was falling apart. In fact, the meaning of the murder is not at all a liberation for me. It's because she . . . I don't want to give an explanation, but, she thought that if she will kill the effect that she will kill the cause also. But the cause is much bigger than that, you know? That man is not the cause of the effect, you know what I mean? Because she wanted everything in order, you know? I think so. I'm not in her head. And it is only an image also. I don't know. I cannot explain more than that. And also the last shot is much more dramatic I think than the murder. If I had just

finished with the murder, I can understand, okay, the film is finished. She killed. But it's a complete eight minutes of film afterwards that is much more important and dramatic than the murder in itself.

**RICH: Yeah, the murder is not shot dramatically at all. I had the feeling that it's because of everyone's associations—as you said, with Hollywood film—that people who are used to formal film do not have the trouble that somebody else might have with the length or with the rhythm or the kind of shooting, yet they haven't learned to get away from their reaction to murder, that psychologically they give it more importance even if it's not shown.**

AKERMAN: Sure, yeah. But in fact, it was shot like any other gesture she has made. I don't know. I don't agree. Because they make a kind of hierarchy. So, a kiss in close-up: it's very high in the hierarchy of the image in the commercial field. Someone doing the dishes is very low. But I think all the images have the same importance, in fact. A kiss and someone doing the dishes and murder. And so they are making another hierarchy when they don't want murder because they say it's too sensational. Why? I don't agree at all.

**RICH: I find that interesting because I think that, in the United States at least, a lot of formal filmmaking has reached a sort of dead end from that kind of purism.**

AKERMAN: I think so too. Very much so. You know, I'm not interested by [it]. It was very powerful . . . when I came here in '71, and it really changed my whole [view] . . . it opened a lot of things in my mind towards film. But now it is getting so academic, you know? You have to do like that one and like that one. It's getting as oppressive as Hollywood was. In its way, because it doesn't reach such a big audience. But for people who know that kind of movie, you know, it's getting very oppressive.

**RICH: To me, it's interesting to take that kind of attitude from the formal film and then to go to the kind of subjects of Hollywood of emotion or of character and narrative that have been taboo, and then to work putting them together again.**

AKERMAN: Hmm, aha, but I really think it's not *par hasard*, no coincidence, that I'm European: because, in fact, I came here, I took some freedom from the European filmmaking, and I went back to Europe and I took freedom from the American structuralist or formalist films.



**Rich: In Europe, there seems to be much more of a tradition of doing a kind of avant-garde work within a feature or a narrative film . . .**

AKERMAN: In New York, it was no Hollywood . . . The producer was never as important in Europe as in

Hollywood. The auteur was always someone also. You have had some freedom, always. Not totally, but some. You start from the beginning of your movie and you finish with the editing. And here, every space was chopped [up] so it was a kind of product. So even if I like some Hollywood films, it was done a little bit like Campbell's soup. It was not the case in Europe. When you are a director, you start with the script, working with the man who does the script, and you finish with the mixing. You don't just shoot another one and another one and another one, without staying to work with the editor.

**Rich: Did you do the editing yourself on *Jeanne Dielman*?**

AKERMAN: No, I did it with someone, with an editor.<sup>9</sup> But I was there all the time.

**Rich: Was there another print that was longer than this one?<sup>10</sup>**

AKERMAN: No, that was a mistake. In fact, I never counted how long the film was. I knew it was eleven reels, so I knew how long each reel was supposed to be, so I thought it was 3 hours and 45 minutes. But finally when I looked at my watch, I saw it was 3 hours and 18 minutes. So, it was a mistake at the beginning. No, that was the only print.

**Rich: How do you feel that the attention given to *Jeanne Dielman* has changed how you can work, or how you feel about it?**

AKERMAN: Very bad! (*Laughs.*) No, with *Jeanne Dielman* I really think that I have reached a point, it's like an achieved work. I have achieved what I was looking for, for seven years, since I [started] in film. So now I can do a film like that. I can repeat it and repeat it again, which I don't want. So I have to find another way. I have to look for something else, which I don't know yet. The only one thing I know: if I make a film closer to me—now I think I will do that—I may find another way, not just be stuck in that formalist mode, because it can be formalist [formulaic] too, you know? That's the only route I can see for me right now.

I made the [new] film in New York [but] I would like to work abroad in another space, so that will be a change,

too . . . You know, when you are a child and an adolescent, you are not going out in the world in some ways. Now, I know a lot about how the machine is working—the world machine. Not everything is inside [internal], like when I was an adolescent. That's why I think I am going outside.

**Rich: For this next film?<sup>11</sup>**

AKERMAN: Yeah.

**Rich: What is the film you just made in New York?**

AKERMAN: It's a film about New York.<sup>12</sup> I don't say that I am making a film where I take [in] all of New York, just some New York shots. And the sound track is partially composed by the letters my mother sent me when I was there, three or five years ago, and also other songs. It's a film *de passage*, that will help me to go somewhere else, I think, because it's not as ambitious as *Jeanne Dielman*. I was feeling okay, but it was not very ambitious. It was the work I wanted to do and not do a big, big thing . . . So it was fine, it was a pleasure. The only one thing is that I love to work with actors, and in that film there were no actors [so] it was less interesting in the shooting. The mixing and the editing were very interesting, but to shoot, it was nothing much, not like *Jeanne Dielman*, because I love to work with actors and it was missing in that film.

**Rich: Do you work with women on the crew as well as with actresses?**

AKERMAN: It depends. In the last film I did not work with a lot of people—just Babette [Mangolte] and some other women. I could maybe at another time, but that was not the right time. But what do you mean?

**Rich: I just wondered if you preferred working with women or how much you collaborate with the people in the crew?**

AKERMAN: Not too much in the last one. And I worked with almost all women. And I prefer it, but it's hard. It's harder in some ways and easier in other ways.

**Rich: It's hard because of the energy, or hard to find women to do it with?**

AKERMAN: In some ways women are not used [to it] like the men who work in film. That's one thing. Not all of them, but the one I had with me. Also, the affectivity.<sup>13</sup> They are not used to putting affectivity “there” (*motioning off to the side*). With men, they work, even if they don't like the people who work with them. Or if they do, if they have problems, they work because that's what they've been doing since (*she gestures behind her*) a long time. With the women who were with me, all the problems were there in the middle of the



work, the sentimental problem, all kinds, the personal problem, the political problem, everything was there, right in the middle. You can't just put them away for the time of working, which is very hard in a film because you have to be very fast, and you have to finish what you're supposed to do in one day.

**RICH: So they are more demanding? There's a more total kind of involvement when working with women, do you think? They are less willing to repress all other aspects of their life [for the shoot]?**

AKERMAN: Yes (*she giggles*), I think so. This part doesn't have to be public, but . . . the last time I have worked with a man, the sound man, I think he loves me, but I don't love him. But he still does a very good job. But in the case of a woman, it could be just the opposite. If things like that happen, because it shows more. I like it in some way, but it's very hard.

**RICH: It's very intense.**

AKERMAN: A movie is already so complicated that you can really be doing without that. But also, you know what, my shooting was very hard. I don't know how I finished. But afterwards when I did the mixing, and it was a man, a nice man, when he started with his jokes, oh, I said, I even prefer the women I had in my shooting. His joke! I can't take that anymore.

And also, I had to fight with him to have something. He knew everything—the mixing. I didn't know a lot about the mixing, so I tried to have the things I wanted. And it was very Southern, you know, we were smiling all the time, but it was a smiling fight. And when Delphine came to the studio, you know, for the words [the looping and post-dubbing] and she had to breathe for the love scene, I took a guy to [record] that [but] because of the mixing guy, you know, they were joking, I just couldn't direct it, they were making me sick. He was very nice, but something was wrong. I cannot explain. And Delphine was telling me, "But say something, Chantal!" And I was just paralyzed. And that doesn't happen with women. Even if there were some other things that were really hard, but that kind of very deep thing, that you cannot see what is your part, what is the situation between a man and a woman who make you like that . . . ooph. So I prefer to work with women anyway.

**RICH: Would a man like that sit through *Jeanne Dielman*?**

AKERMAN: I think so, yes. I have seen some (*laughing*), yes.

**RICH: And do they feel threatened by it?**

AKERMAN: It depends because they can react [by] laughing, things like that. It's a way to avoid it, to protect yourself. They have lots of resources to protect themselves (*more laughter*).

**RICH: You're working on the script now for the next film. Is it again going to be a kind of day in the life of a woman, and do you think it will deal again still with that kind of sexuality and that kind of tension?**

AKERMAN: Yes, because the subject is about a woman like me who meets an older woman, her mother in fact. But that's not exactly the subject. It's hard to explain, but it's also about women. And about specific problems, and also the problem that we don't know where to go right now. It's kind of also in the feminist thing [where] we are stuck a little bit. And I would like to make a film about that. And more specifically about myself being stuck. You know, I cannot talk for all the others, but what is my feeling right now about that. Meeting another woman who is 45 or 50, who is my mother. It's not true—she doesn't meet me at that level—but who believes in the new woman. And I myself cannot believe so much, so strongly, in that new woman anymore. You know what I mean? It's like that kind of thing.

**RICH: It seems that's the only thing to do now is to make that kind of film, to try to figure out where to go next in art as well as in life.**

AKERMAN: Hmmm, yes, it will be in art . . . because, you know, I hope I will go somewhere else than *Jeanne Dielman* (*pausing*) in the form.

## Notes

1. For more on Akerman, my first meeting with her in 1974, and some of my other thoughts on her work, see the chapters "Prologue: Knokke-Heist and the Fury That Was Edinburgh" and "Designing Desire: Chantal Akerman" in my *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 156–73.
2. I believe that her close relationship with Delphine Seyrig cannot be overstated. On different occasions, they each spoke to me of their friendship and deep bond, with lifelong breakfasts, and with Seyrig's appearance in Akerman's later *Golden Eighties* (1986) as Jeanne Schwartz. Apart from her acting, Seyrig was an activist and passionate feminist who founded the Simone de Beauvoir video production center and archive in Paris. Akerman had a terrible time coming to terms with Seyrig's death from cancer in 1990. It is notable that Akerman herself died just days before the 25th anniversary of Seyrig's own death.



3. *Chantal Akerman: An Interview*, Lyn Blumenthal and Kate Horsfield (1976), 50:38, U.S. Thanks to Kate Horsfield and Abina Manning for permission to transcribe and publish the text here. Thanks to the Video Data Bank Preservation Program and the Lyn Blumenthal Memorial Fund for the digitizing and transfer

of the original Portapak cassette. Images in this text are from the VDB interview. For purchase, see the Video Data Bank website: [www.vdb.org/titles/chantal-akerman-interview](http://www.vdb.org/titles/chantal-akerman-interview). Thanks, too, to Marc Francis for transcription assistance.

4. Here, Akerman draws a circle in the air to describe the connection between the early film, with her in the central role in the kitchen, and the kitchen with Seyrig in *Jeanne Dielman*.
5. It is not clear, but she apparently is talking about *L'enfant aimé ou je joue à être une femme mariée* (*The Beloved Child, or I Play at Being a Married Woman*, 1971), the short she made directly after *Saute ma ville*.
6. Since *Je, tu, il, elle* had not yet been shown in the United States or written about, this is actually Akerman's own description of her film for a new audience with no preconception of the work. Note particularly her insistence that

“the subject is not important” when it is, in fact, essential and sensational.

7. Akerman is referring to an earlier screening at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, where she gave that explanation to the audience and to curator Melinda Ward.
8. Here she is referring to Wilhelm Reich's *The Function of the Orgasm*, originally published in German in 1927. Translated into English and combined with his “orgone box” and his term, the “sexual revolution,” it made Reich a central and controversial figure in the counterculture movements of the 1950s and 1960s.
9. It was shot by Babette Mangolte and edited by Patricia Canino.
10. There was initial confusion because of a discrepancy in running times which led people to think that the film had been cut, but here Akerman explains that was based on her own mistake, and that this is the only version.
11. The next film, which she is discussing here, is *Les rendez-vous d'Anna* (*Meetings with Anna*, 1978).
12. The film she had just shot and describes here is *News from Home* (1977).
13. By “affectivity” she seems to mean: feelings, emotions, personal reactions that could disrupt the shooting—or certainly the calm on the set!