

# Chantal Akerman Travelling

Bozar-Centre for Fine Arts  
Jeu de Paume

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Shooting photographs from the films *Portrait of a Young Girl at the End of the 1960s in Brussels*, 1993; *The Captive (Paris)*, 1999; and *A Couch in New York*, 1995

In *Chantal Akerman by Chantal Akerman* (1996), Chantal Akerman tried her hand at a self-portrait as a cineaste of her time. As a director, she would have preferred to let her films speak for themselves, replaying clips as if they were rushes. But the principle of the *Cinéma, de notre temps* [Cinema, of our time] series is for the film-maker to appear on screen in person. So Akerman decided to read a text, facing the camera, explaining why she found this problematic. After the montage of images from her films, she returns to the screen briefly to say: 'My name is Chantal Akerman. I was born in Brussels. And that is true. That is true.' Facts, and not fiction: a person is born on a specific day in a specific place. The origin sets the tone. But this is not sufficient to create a self-portrait of Akerman as a cineaste of our time.

In her first short film, *Blow Up My Town* (1968), Akerman wasted no time demolishing the city where she was born. It was only in fleeing Brussels that she truly became a cineaste. And yet she would continue to return. Brussels, Paris, New York: these were the three points of a triangle within which she travelled throughout her life, with a pied-à-terre in each. They are also the three poles of *Chantal Akerman: Travelling*, along with a few detours to Eastern Europe and past the border between the USA and Mexico, into the desert. Borders, and how to move past them: a constant preoccupation in the life and work of Akerman. She needed ways to escape. To distance herself, even from her prior productions and the genres at which she had already tried her hand. It was, for her, an artistic strategy.

Brussels. Akerman's native city. The city of intimate interiors and the main character in several of her films. Jeanne Dielman's apartment, Brussels-South railway station, the hotels, the cafés, the streets, a mall (the Golden Fleece, which was reconstructed in a studio in Paris): they are omnipresent.

Akerman endowed Brussels with a cinematic memory, and the city of Brussels named a promenade in her honour: the central berm of the Quai du Commerce is now called the Allée Chantal Akerman. A blind façade of the Quai aux Barques has been decorated with a fresco depicting a scene from *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, an apartment that is indeed only a few paces away, in the centre of Brussels. In *Jeanne Dielman*, Henri Storck plays a client during one of the moments when Jeanne is working as a prostitute. Storck is one of the founders of the Royal Belgian Film Archive, now CINEMATEK, of which Akerman was a director for many years. The institution conserves her films and the archives of her production company, Paradise Films (scripts, statements of intent, research, unfilmed projects, film shoot photos, press kits and media articles, interviews). Number 3, rue Ravenstein, the headquarters of CINEMATEK, is also home to the Fondation Chantal Akerman. In 1967 Akerman made four films using 8 mm standard, one of them set partly in the inner courtyard of the Hôtel de Clèves (CINEMATEK headquarters), in preparation for her entrance exam for the INSAS (Institut national supérieur des arts du spectacle). The story comes full circle, and the rest is history.

New York. The adoptive city. City of escapes, where Akerman maintained a distance from her birth. The city of her cinematic awakening, where in particular she discovered first-hand the films of Michael Snow, Jonas Mekas and Andy Warhol. The city in which she made her first films: *The Room* (1972), *Hotel Monterey* (1972), *Hanging Out Yonkers* (1973) and *News from Home* (1976), love letters to New York, with voiceovers of concerned letters from a mother addressed from the filmmaker's hometown - an umbilical history that would continue until her final film, *No Home Movie*, a back-and-forth between these two anchor points. The city where Akerman taught, at City College of New York.

Paris. The city that took Akerman in. At once close to Brussels and a safe distance away. The city of love and friendship. It was also the base camp of her editors, including Claire Atherton. In 1984, 20 years after the Nouvelle Vague, she and five film-makers of her generation offered a view of Paris in the short film *I'm Hungry, I'm Cold*, part of the anthology film *Paris vu par...* [Paris seen by...]. On Paris, too, Akerman left her mark. In 2021 the city inaugurated the Allée Chantal-Akerman in the neighbourhood where she lived for many years and where she filmed *Tomorrow We Move* in 2003. Paris, the city where Akerman died on 5 October 2015.

Between 1993 and 1995, Akerman was one of the first film-makers to make the leap from the cinema to the exhibition hall. She and Atherton recut her film, *From the East*, to create the installation *From the East: Bordering on Fiction*. This was a second escape, far from the strictures of the film industry. A distance for a rapprochement. Even back then, the exhibition and the accompanying publication were the result of a collaboration between the Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume in Paris, Bozar-Centre for Fine Arts, in Brussels and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Akerman found a second wind in museum spaces. The art world welcomed her, which made her proud. Between 1995 and 2015 she made some 20 video installations, all of which enjoyed international success. It was in this context that Akerman took part in the 49th Venice Biennale (2001), Documenta XI in Cassel (2002) and the 29th São Paulo Biennial (2010).

And yet, for Akerman, 'the ultimate art' remained writing. In addition to screenplays, she wrote two stage plays, *Hall de nuit* [Night hall] (1992) and the monologue *Moving In* (1994). In 1998, she published her first book, *Une famille à Bruxelles* [A family in Brussels], hovering at the edge of non-fiction. For the 2000 edition of the Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels, Akerman herself read excerpts from *Une famille à Bruxelles* with Aurore Clément, Anna in *The Meetings of Anna*. A touching, intimate experience. Akerman embodied her text, seeming to write its sentences as she read them.

Akerman was non-negotiable: take her or leave her. Her work was the air she breathed. She could not fake it. She needed a film family to support her, to accompany her. To dedicate an exhibition and a publication to her, then, is an intimate endeavour. Exploring her work requires us to investigate our own innermost selves, because the experience also calls up personal memories in each of us. In the book, we give the floor to various people who were close to Akerman, and to artists who carry on her work, in order to create a lively, choral portrait.

The exhibition *Chantal Akerman: Travelling* and the accompanying book create a collective posthumous portrait of Chantal Akerman as a cineaste of our time. A distance has been created, including in time. The archives are an infinite source of new cuts, new assemblies, to shed light on the director and her work. The audience chooses for itself how much time to spend in front of an image, an archive, defining its own path, becoming its own editor.

Bon voyage!

—

Christophe Slagmuylder, general and artistic director at Bozar-Centre for Fine Arts, Brussels

Zoë Gray, director of exhibitions at Bozar-Centre for Fine Arts, Brussels

Quentin Bajac, director of Jeu de Paume, Paris

Translated from the French by Daniel Levin Becker





Céline Brouwez  
Marta Ponsa  
Laurence Rassel  
Alberta Sessa

## Travelling

‘Why you start with a tragicomedy in which you play yourself.  
And why you seem to abandon it in favour of experimental and silent films.  
Why no sooner are those finished across the ocean than you come back, and back to narration.  
Why you stop acting and make a musical.  
Why you make documentaries and then adapt Proust.  
Why you also write, a play, a story. Why you make films about music.  
And finally another comedy.  
Plus for a while you’ve been making installations too. Without really thinking of yourself as an artist. Because of the word artist.’<sup>1</sup>

In the spirit of these words from Chantal Akerman, whose career moved freely from one cinematic genre to another, from one artistic field or even from one country to another, the exhibition *Chantal Akerman: Travelling* adopts the rhythm and milestones of the film-maker’s comings and goings in order to elaborate her films, writings and installations.

This book draws on them as well to assemble a polyphony of perspectives situated in time and in space, calling upon such diverse practices and disciplines as history, poetry, dramaturgy, cinema, sociology, music and choreography. A plurality of authors, close to Akerman or further removed, involved in the creation of her works or strongly inspired by them, answered our invitation to share their memories and their insights.

Our primary aim here was to highlight accounts of the *entours*<sup>2</sup> of the artist and her body of work, whose essential role has not been sufficiently emphasised to date. Indeed, works of art exist in reality only if people believe in them, devote themselves to them, love them and accompany them. Without the crucial gestures of friendship, support, relationships, passion, the ineffability and care that were and continue to be lavished upon Akerman’s work, would the cooking of a potato ever have become a cinematic event? This publication, then, like the exhibition it accompanies, happily embraces the ‘living matter’ that eludes linear narrative. The many crew photographs taken from the archives of the Fondation Chantal Akerman testify, down to the discoloration of the paper, to the succession of eras and to the evolution in the economic conditions of

production and in the artist's very works, which have graduated over time from the status of 'little films' to feature-length films, or from documentaries to installations in the museum space.

As Akerman explained:

'That's why people's first films are always more personal. There's no machine; you make it work outside of union agreements and such like. But once you start working within a machine, the things that escape the machine are the relationships between people, between someone else and someone else, between the director and the person who's acting: that's what gets lost, and what becomes important. When you work outside the machine everything blends together more, the relationships and the organisation.'<sup>3</sup>

So, editor Claire Atherton, film historian and critic Jacqueline Aubenas, director of photography Luc Benhamou, actor and director Jan Decorte (here in dialogue with artist Anouk De Clercq), musician Sonia Wieder-Atherton and producer Marilyn Watelet recall, recount, confide and entrust. Their contributions bear the traces of a film, of a sound, of moments spent with Akerman in a bedroom, on a trip or while working together on an installation. These singular stories make up a collective body.

Then there are those who watch and connect to the work. We invited artists from a variety of backgrounds to join this chorus: film-maker and writer Christophe Honoré, choreographer Latifa Laâbissi, artist Sharon Lockhart, poet Eileen Myles, film-makers Nicolás Pereda and Wang Bing. They have put their own practices in conversation with the work.

Finally, the voices of historian Sylvie Lindeperg and sociologist Verónica Gago were invited to make themselves heard in echoes of, respectively, the projected images of *From the East: Bordering on Fiction* and *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, providing other points of view.

It was only natural for this volume to begin with 'News from Chantal: The Maternal Territory and the Novelistic Landscape' by Jacqueline Aubenas, first published in 1982. Its author has followed Akerman's work throughout her career and done much to enhance its profile. And this essay, so pertinent to the way the 'maternal territory' embraces the entire body of work from beginning to end, continues to illuminate the artist's films, installations and writings.

What follows, though not strictly chronological, is organised around temporal nodes. Akerman's first feature-length film - which nearly half a

century after its theatrical release finally received the recognition it deserves<sup>4</sup> - *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), constitutes the first anchor point. With Verónica Gago we focus our attention on the treatment of those invisible tasks said to be 'anecdotal' and 'domestic', for while the cinema has accustomed us to readymade meals, clothes washed and ironed, and the housekeeping done, Akerman's film shows the temporality of the motions of labour the 'home-factory'.

From the kitchen and bedrooms, we glide toward the film set and the editing table in order to watch the crew at work, and to take the measure of the effects at play behind the production. We sail through the recollections of Jan Decorte, related to Anouk De Clercq in a conversation held for this publication. Born the same year as Akerman, Decorte plays Jeanne Dielman's son in this so-called 'realist' movie. Nonetheless, his mere presence in the film - the man playing the child - indicates that it is a collective construction - the 'cinema-factory'.

Decorte also recalls the constant exchanges between Delphine Seyrig and Akerman, painstakingly 'searching together for the right tone until a balance was found' - the 'cinema-chorus'.

Meanwhile, watching *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, Latifa Laâbissi, a choreographer, wrote in her notebook: 'Phantom gestures, a score of hand gestures'. Laâbissi takes these repeated, alienated gestures out of the domestic space and reinterprets them 'as a dance'.

The movement continues. Another node, more intimate, arises: that of the bursts of emotion emerging from the 'bedroom-refuge' and inhabited by the ghosts of history, with or without the capital H. The words of Eileen Myles are made up of noises, sounds and voices, resonating around the memories and insights the author brings to Akerman's *I, You, He, She*. The protagonist of the film and of Myles's poem moves across genres, alone, with he, with she, literally.

Sonia Wieder-Atherton, accompanist/companion, writes of the bond Akerman maintained with music and scores. The cellist directs our attention to the roundness of the words, to 'the rhythm of her writing [...] free of punctuation or practically so, the phrase ceaselessly making and remaking itself, with no beginning and no end, as though all of this had been going on for a long time.'

Sharing of intimacy, filming locations, rolling.

Luc Benhamou explains: 'Akerman doesn't film events unfolding in time, she films the time

during which events unfold. The image is never anticipated, or prepared, or imagined. Until the moment of filming, it is pure thought. The image is what always comes last.' At first there are words: Akerman writes, takes notes, pages 'containing time', continues Benhamou, who shared with her painful experiences of history and of the soul, and who crafted the images of several of her films in the 1980s.

Christophe Honoré also seizes on an image from one of those films, *Golden Eighties* (1986), no less haunted when he writes and makes films: for it is necessary, he writes, to let ghosts arise.

You must always write, when you want to make a film, although you know nothing of the film you want to make. Yet you already know everything about it, but you don't realise this - fortunately, I would say. Only when it is confronted with the act of making will it reveal itself. Groping along, spluttering, in a state of blind and limping hesitation. Sometimes in a flash of self-evidence.<sup>5</sup>

Rolling.

Another node, another space, another milestone: the 1990s. From the film *From the East* (1993), an installation was born: *From the East: Bordering on Fiction* (1995). Claire Atherton uses the words 'tension', 'contrast', 'rupture', 'slowness' and 'mystery' in the editing of the film, and then from the film to the installation. What happens between the images, between the screens? We shall see. We the viewers have this responsibility: what do we see?

Travelling.

*From the East: Bordering on Fiction*: from the outside, from elsewhere, to editing at home, cables stretched throughout the apartment. But a voice is missing outside the projection room. So they add a 25th screen.

Akerman also spoke of writing as a primary desire, of the importance of the text and of the prohibition of the idolised image. She will end up making 'non-naturalist' films, as she put it, poetically more abstract, to be deciphered rather than received as such. In an echo of the museum world and the painted image of an exhibition hall, she also installs her images towards a point of fugue or perspective, images across which we move to encounter other images, other sounds, other stories.

'Should I struggle against disorientation or abandon myself to it?' we might ask ourselves as we follow the thread of texts and voices in the space of the book we are holding - to borrow the words of Sylvie Lindeperg in the face of *From the East*:

*Bordering on Fiction*. 'Perhaps both at once, in a single motion,' Lindeperg continues, 'by retracing the intimate geography of Chantal Akerman and diving into her images, with no compass but the pulse of sensory perceptions.'

Travelling.

These movements of writing, of the camera, these journeys, these shifts between the mechanisms for the sharing of scopic experience inhabit other artists such as Sharon Lockhart, who strives to reweave her own ties to the film-maker's work, from art school to the projection room and then the exhibition hall. She too travels.

These artists' points of view express, in their own way, the question that Akerman's work inspires in everyone: how did she do it?

So let us follow, into other territories, the thread of renewed conversations between Akerman's productions and their own. Distant spaces, another node, rolling: Wang Bing exposes images of margins and the excluded in his own documentary works *Man with No Name* (2009) and *Traces and Father and Sons* (both 2014), while Nicolás Pereda draws Akerman into one of his fictions in which, between the walls of a peaceful apartment overlooking Mexico City, a dreamlike but plausible dialogue is established, interrupted by the ring of a telephone.

We will not ask her, we will not ask ourselves, to explain everything, to justify everything: 'Above all, don't psychologise,' Akerman advised. What was she doing in Mexico? What was she doing in Paris? In Los Angeles? In New York? In Russia? In Israel? In Ukraine? In Brussels?

Go see.

You will experience something physical that you will not quite be able to explain, predicts producer Marilyn Watelet, without whom none of what you see would exist. And to quote Madame Schwartz, confessing to Mado in *Golden Eighties*: 'In life, everything always works out.'

It is hard to believe, at the time of writing this, that everything always works out, when so many are leaving and haunting us.

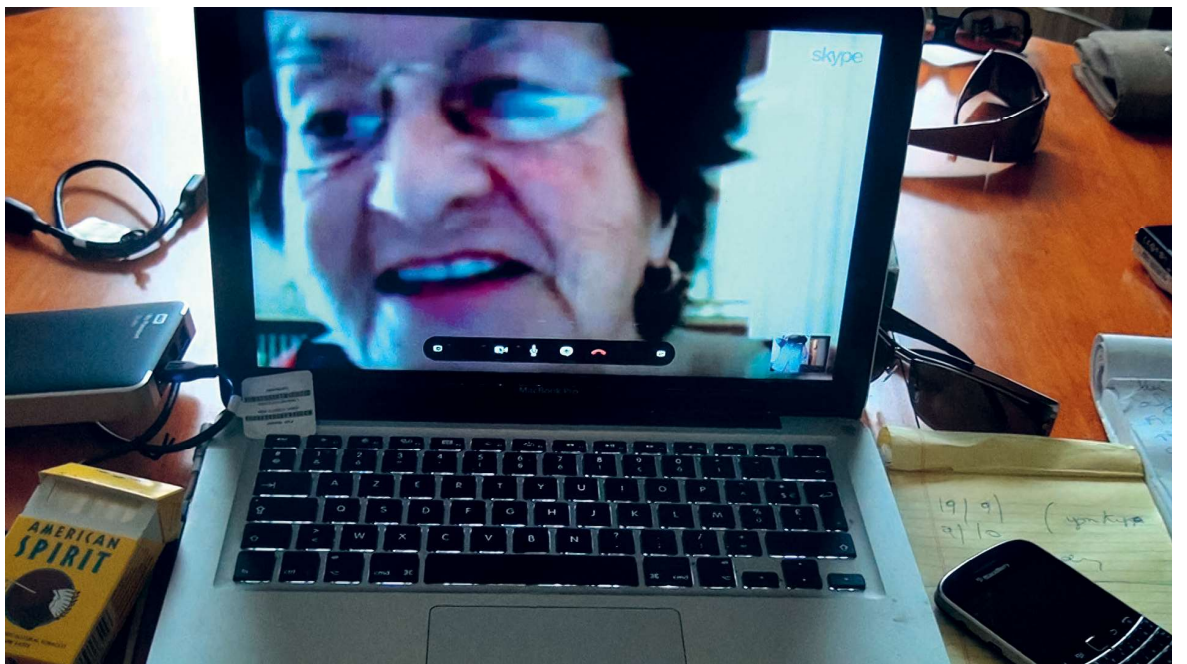
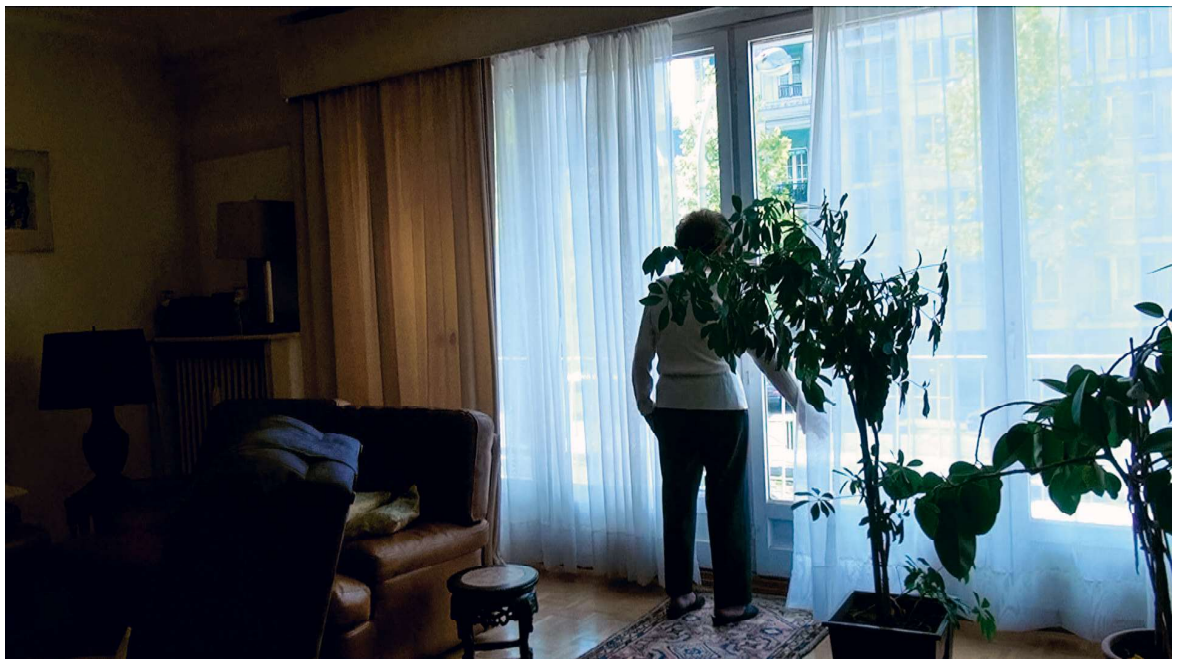
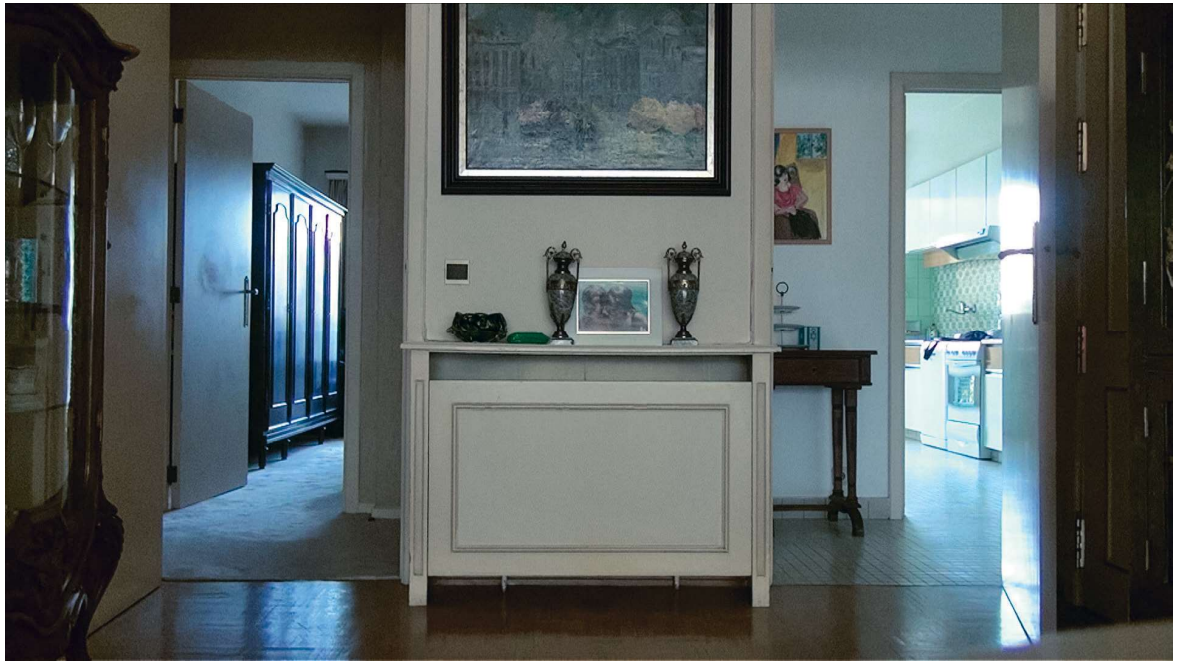
'The world is small, they always say; it depends.'<sup>6</sup>

Translated from the French by Daniel Levin Becker

1 Chantal Akerman, «Le frigidaire est vide. On peut le remplir», in *Chantal Akerman. Autoportrait en cinéaste* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma; Centre Pompidou, 2004), p. 10.

2 Psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Jean Oury (1924-2014) used the term *entours* to describe an 'ambiance' comprising the details

- of daily life, places, relationships and everything liable to have an impact on a person.
- 3 Chantal Akerman, 'Rencontre avec Chantal Akerman', interview with Caroline Champetier in *Cahiers du cinéma*, 288, May 1978, p. 60.
  - 4 'The Greatest Films of All Time', *Sight and Sound*, survey, 2022, <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/greatest-films-all-time> (accessed 8 January 2024).
  - 5 Chantal Akerman, voiceover for the 25th screen in the installation *From the East: Bordering on Fiction* (1995).
  - 6 Chantal Akerman, notes for *I'm Hungry, I'm Cold* (1984), archives of the Fondation Chantal Akerman, Brussels.







Bruxelles le 10 juin.

Ma très chère petite fille.

J'ai bien reçu ta lettre et j'espère que tu continueras à m'écrire souvent.

De toutes façons j'espère que tu me reverras vite.

J'espère que tu continues à bien te faire et que tu travailles déjà.

Je vois que New York te plaît et que tu es contente aussi malgré qu'on voudrait te revoir le plus vite nous sommes aussi contents. Dis nous quand penses-tu revenir. Enfin chez nous c'est comme d'habitude, sauf que Sylviane est gupée et reste à la maison et que moi je ne suis pas fort bien, ma tension est basse et je prends des médicaments et des

Chantal Akerman's handwritten copy of a letter from her mother Natalia Akerman to her in the early 1970s, press kit



This text initially appeared in 1982 in *Chantal Akerman* (Brussels: Ateliers des arts, cahier n° 1, 1982, pp. 57-62). This publication followed a seminar dedicated to the film-maker's body of work, organised by the Institut supérieur des arts du spectacle et des techniques de diffusion et de communication de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (INSAS), the school where Jacqueline Aubenas taught and where Chantal Akerman spent some months between 1967 and 1968, before leading workshops there years later.

Chantal Akerman stands, intensely, insistently, at the centre of her films. She produces them as a film-maker, shows herself in them as an actress, expresses herself in them as a writer. After four feature-length films, only the current screenplay for *La Galerie*<sup>1</sup> seems to enact a rupture, drawing from a fictional novelistic sensibility rather than an existential one. But it is quite clear that this life in images, offered with an apparent and radiant 'indecenty', serves, at the very moment it is shown, exposed in the literal sense of the word, to immediately articulate something else, something infinitely more complex, more distant, that shifts it towards a narrativity that surpasses the material of the 'I' to such an extent that a viewer, one who sees one of her films every two years, can fail to make this vital connection without sacrificing the pleasure of the story, of the gaze, or of the analysis. This 'I', like the pit of a fruit, wraps itself in a pulp that conceals it, not that it wants to be hidden, quite the contrary, but it secretes another substance that makes it immediately consumable, flavourful. It becomes a film product of enormous independence.

1968: *Blow Up My Town*. 1978: *The Meetings of Anna*. Ten years in the cinema that make it possible for us to draw up an identity card, a curriculum vitae,

a photograph of Chantal Akerman. Young woman born in Brussels and living in Paris. Film-maker. Travels frequently. Has been to New York several times. Shopkeeper parents. Single. Money problems. Free life. Pleasant physique. Between these administratively neutral civil status data that we are forced to see, to read, and those states of life presented as a journal or personal writings before arriving at the functioning of the films as such, analysed for their images, their framing, their sequence, their length, there is material that is given to us raw or masquerading as story, rich, irreducible, but in which emerge, among others, two themes, two constants: Jewishness and the mother. It is of this maternal territory that spreads from film to film, as a matrix of the novelistic, that I wish to speak.

Chantal Akerman jumped straight into it, with devastating vitality, in *Blow Up My Town*. A first film that 'childishly', as though at play, indicates it, speaks it, upsets it and destroys it. This devastation is carried off with a schoolyard pugnacity, a 'normal' sense of cruelty. This territory is, from the first images, defined as an enclosure - the exits and openings are closed - reduced to its essence, the notion of maintenance: maintenance of life by way of food, maintenance of the

objects necessary for life by way of housekeeping. As it is omnipresent and unavoidable there, with the joy of a savage amusing himself before the initiation, the inevitable assimilation, Chantal Akerman tames it by derision, by misinterpretation and misdirection: it becomes a generator of waste, of filth, of disorder, of diversion. Then she kills it out of a desire for destructive deliverance, half auto-da-fé, half anarcho-terrorist act. A first film in the matrix that immediately establishes the home-mother-housework connection. What we might first take as elements of humour, 'cream pie' - or 'spaghetti fight'- style gags, are, it seems to me, nothing but images of exorcism. It is certainly a very meaningful accident that *The Beloved Child, or I Play At Being a Married Woman*, Chantal Akerman's second short film, was not shown to us.

The beloved child, at this moment in the filmography unfolding, as we will see, in a logical trajectory into the maternal territory, this beloved child, after the devastation stage, no longer wants to be beloved. This is the separation stage. The other films, until *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, speak of distancing, the discovery of the world, of others, of sexuality, of a personal life. This is not a tearing of the umbilical cord but a vagrancy in which forgetting is permitted, in which the relation is buried, provisionally erased. After this the mother will become central again, but the approach taken to her marks a progression, a dynamic of the place she occupies. In *Jeanne Dielman*, we see her gestures. In *News from Home*, we hear her words. In *The Meetings of Anna*, she is put on stage.

In parallel to this progressive physical appropriation, another evolution is legible. Once the mothering mother, she now becomes the fellow creature, the friend, the one who will be Anna's fourth meeting. At that point, if she remains the mother whose comprehensive tenderness in the face of difficult confessions we do not doubt, those very confessions confer upon her another dimension, lending her her status as a woman. She gains her sentimental and sexual autonomy and at the same time gives it to her daughter. *La Galerie* further reaffirms her independence; her life transformed, transposed, makes her a novelistic character unto herself with a profession, a past, a life that no longer has anything but distant links to autobiographical reality or the properly maternal body language related to the home. The inversion is complete: she no longer feeds her daughter; her daughter feeds on her.

This maturation of relations, this salubrious disengagement, nonetheless leaves her an essential role: the maternal territory represents the territory itself. Here the mother returns to her role as Jewish mother. In the face of continual uprootings, of the wanderings and insecurity imposed by history, she becomes, at a level besides that of slightly kitschy symbolism or nationalist imagery, the motherland. Wherever she is, that is the land. The temporary one, not the promised land, but the land. To return to her is to cross the borders of security, to have a place, to be from somewhere.

In the journey we have just sketched out, perhaps it would be useful to linger on the most central part of this maternal territory, after the classic



*The Beloved Child, or I Play at Being a Married Woman*, 1971

rebellion-rejection, before the no less desirable egalitarian distancing. The moment in which the maternal temporality is assumed, the fusion with the home. The way Chantal Akerman views this allows us to see with great acuity the duality of this function. The mother, crushing and crushed, prisoner of an order that she does not analyse but enforces and takes care to preserve. But one and the other, the one who prevents herself from being and the one who allows others to exist only under her supervision, manage the minuscule. Their horizon is never personal.

#### Jeanne Dielman or the domestic enclosure

Jeanne's life is made of hours, of gestures, of repetitions, of things to be done, of order to establish or to maintain. Her schedule is as sharply delineated as a convent's, leaving no choice but demanding adherence. Monotony is wielded as a sort of anaesthesia. The doors of this enclosure-home shut her in for life. They open only to let through minimal communications. The stranger is admitted for a single precise function only, and his trajectory is delineated. Any unnecessary intrusion is refused: the neighbour will never cross the door's threshold. Words are not spoken to recount or to question. That discourse of openness, of curiosity or of introspection, would be a breath of fresh air. They serve as reminders of the law, giving orders or bandying about banalities and obvious things. Disorder, chance and change disrupt the strict economy of time and of space. Each hour has a destination. Like a danaid, Jeanne spends her time trying to fill the void so that it never appears as such. Every object, every moment, has a coded function. The useless must be chased away. It belongs, like dust bunnies, to the register of excess: a dish that has been served from leaves the table, the light in an unoccupied room is switched off, the creases on the linens erased, the stains removed. The body itself does not unfurl in the bathtub: that place is for washing and for hygiene, not for interactions that are flirtatious or even alive. The bed is not opened for lovemaking. Even the greeting, the hello, becomes a superfluous urbanity between mother and son. Affectivity, like the stove she is always turning down, must not lead to an excess of heat. Time is not a datum; it becomes an object, divisible and sliceable. Like gestures, it belongs to the register of doing, transforms into production. It encloses the story tightly by prohibiting any sense of event. The story will not take its place until time is no longer controlled. Jeanne's tragedy manifests as an hourly drama. Like an invalid, she cannot live without her crutch of timekeeping. In this organisation of emptiness, the slightest incident, the smallest slippage of the everyday,

becomes a major accident. A child crying, getting up at the wrong time, a missing button or potato are troublemakers in this artificial construction whose maniacal rigour is the only barrier against its extreme fragility. Into the breach they open rushes a disorder of pleasure: the waste of coffee thrown away (a pleasure authorised, not seized), the intrusion of pleasure (a pleasure not planned and thus disruptive). It is the rupture of the code. Jeanne was right: nothing must move. When a pair of scissors sticks out or when a man lingers, she has to see this death-giving order all the way through. Jeanne Dielman's household management is there for no reason but to constrain and erase the traces of life, as though life belonged to a world of filth set against a cleanliness never totally nor lastingly attained. This management is there for no other reason than to maintain, to build a dam. It destroys, or at least paralyses, the object to which it applies.

#### *News from Home* or the mother tongue

The mother, here, is no longer the depositary of order but the depositary of place. Chantal Akerman has moved from the description of a character without effect to effect without character. Only in the film that follows will the superimposition and the fusion take place. Where Jeanne forbade herself speeches and sentiments because they were disturbing, here a flood of words and affection defines the maternal territory. Simple phrases that articulate as closely as possible, as accurately as possible, life going by in its banality, just as Jeanne's motions managed the ongoing everything of the everyday. But here the words open themselves to the novelistic instead of shutting it out. Repetition is never avoided, quite the opposite: all the instances of 'your loving mother' and 'my darling' are like refrains endlessly repeated between the stanzas of a very long song, such as they used to write, with few changes from verse to verse. These echoes belong to a lived experience that is kept here as the witness of a truth. Letters follow letters as days follow days. The point is not novelty or event but nearly nothing that accumulates and makes up life. Time, here, is a producer of the novelistic. These letters recount in the same way the characters in *The Meetings of Anna*, two years later, will speak. The family novel with marriages, news from relatives, failed love affairs, evenings in front of the television, dreams, the little house with a little yard finally purchased. The mother is the depositary of the family's story, the guardian of time because she keeps track of birthdays. 'She takes upon herself', as they say, everyone's health, the business worries, the money troubles. She also takes up the secular fears and the resigned wisdom of good