

Anne Charlotte Robertson  
Interview by Caroline Koebel  
Sunday, November 11, 2001  
Telephone: Buffalo, NY - Framingham, MA  
Original long version

Anne Charlotte Robertson (ACR)  
A couple of my films showed out at the Telluride Experimental Exposition just now. He has the only print of one of the films I wanted to show, *Suicide*.

Caroline Koebel (CK)  
Will you be showing *Suicide*?

ACR  
I was going to, so he's going to mail it to me. But he's also got the first film I ever made.

CK  
Can you say something about *Suicide*?

ACR  
For three years I had been hearing my own voice talking in my mind. I know exactly when it started. I was sitting outside the unemployment office and I got this letter from a friend of mine who I loved a great deal, who was the best friend of the guy who had trapped me in an abusive relationship. I lived with this other guy for four years basically because he had a gun. I couldn't get away from him. I mean I would take courses at other places and on my way home every phone booth along the way would ring. He threatened people and he stalked me when I would try to get free of him.

CK  
The phones would actually ring?

ACR  
The phones would really ring. He would have found out the phone numbers for each of these phone booths on the way back from the subway stop. He would time my walk back from the subway stop and he would call each phone booth in turn so as I was walking by the phone would ring. This is the sort of thing when I tried to get away from him that he would pull. I knew that he had a gun the whole time and he knew Judo; it was really a horrible relationship.

CK  
How did you get out of it?

ACR  
Basically, he started having affairs and admitting them. He had been having affairs before, but suddenly he had an affair with my best friend, my sister and my roommate, all three of them, and then was boasting about it. I said, "Well, I've been in love with your best friend all along. He blew his top at that; he was laughing his head off about his adventures, but when I admitted my love, he moved out. Anyway, back in '76 I was sitting outside the unemployment office and I had a letter from his best friend, who was on an oceanographic ship in the most violent ocean. 'Round Antarctica there's this ring called "The Roaring Forties," thirty-forty feet waves, and he was down in the computer room inside this oceanographic vessel, but he didn't get on deck for weeks at a time, and they were just tossed up and down. I realized that he was either going to die or when he

came back, he was not going to be coming to me. "I wanted to kill myself," went through my mind, and for three years, "I want to kill myself," went through my mind. I counted seconds and usually it was every twenty seconds I would think this thought and all the varieties of that: "I wish I were dead, I ought to kill myself, I don't want to kill myself, I want to kill myself." It was like hearing my own voice out loud. It was the only time in my life I could really say I was hearing voices, but it was my own voice.

CK

This was then translated into your first experimental film?

ACR

No. From '76 through '79 the voices went on and it was MY OWN VOICE. It was like I was standing next to me talking it was so loud.

CK

How old were you at the time?

ACR

Oh god that was 27 to 30. In 1979 I was locked out of my house one night and my film teacher was a diarist. (CK: Who was that?, ACR: Dave Perry). He had said, "carry your camera all the time" and I carried my camera all the time. There's a scene on the street with people digging a gas main in the middle of the night, the guys with the yellow suits, and I just filmed that and I just talked spontaneously. From then on I just kept filming little things and talking about fantasies about suicide. The thing is that I didn't want to kill myself, but I had the voice going on about how I wanted to kill myself. Basically, I wanted to get out of the relationship I was in. I figured the only way was he would kill me or I would kill myself. It just kept going and going and going. But when I shot the film I put it together with all these little snippets and fantasies and I edited at home. Then I took it into school on the night that we were to project it and I went into the hall with a dubbing recorder and projected the film and overdubbed and overdubbed and overdubbed. That's one of the reasons there's this really weird hum (people think). It's because of the sound of the projector running, reverberating in the hall. The voice kept coming and coming and coming; the only way I could get rid of the voice was to go to sleep. Anyway, we showed it at the very end of the class night of showing films. At the end—everyone else left after their film had shown—there were only two or three of my best friends and the teacher. They showed it in this BIG hall and then after we all just sat there and the lights came up and suddenly it was like my mind was as clear as a bell. The voice had just shut off.

CK

What an amazing story. So, you really found the catharsis in making and also in exhibiting that film.

ACR

That's one of the reasons I did *Snooze Alarm*.

CK

Yes, I just watched that. I really love that film, I love how repetitive it is, how incessant it is.

ACR

Well, that was another attempt at self therapy. On days when I was really depressed I would do anything to stay in bed all day. I would keep setting my alarm and intending

to get up, but you know you can reset your alarm about twenty times and then finally the thing starts going HHHHHHHHHHHH! And then you have to reset all the little clocks and things and start all over again. The film is over the course of several days. If you look really closely out that window, you'll notice the weather changes. It was early spring so sometimes snow had fallen and sometimes the flowers were out. Sometimes the sun was shining, sometimes it was gray. I set it up every morning for a couple weeks, just left the camera there. I always wore the same nightgown and this is another reason why the cat seemed to be bouncing around, because it was different days.

CK

These two films, *Suicide* and *Snooze Alarm*, you'll be showing as prints?

ACR

As prints.

CK

That's really exciting. I'm sure the Buffalo audience would really appreciate that. Those two films...you made them at art school?

ACR

I was at University of Massachusetts in Boston. I had been in a lot of different schools and I was pulling together as many transfer credits as I could to get a bachelor's.

CK

I wanted to ask you, you mentioned these first two films being examples of self therapy, how do you in general characterize your work and do you find that the category you might identify it as has changed over the years or has it been fairly consistent?

ACR

Well, once I have a topic done, the therapy's been done and I don't have to do that one again. I have got a script for a thing about mental health in general that I want to do at some point, but that has more to do with the bizarre things that people have said to me in the name of therapy. The film *Apologies* deals with neurotic anxieties. (CK: Are you showing that one? ACR: I can't, the print is out...I can actually have them mail it to me, but I'm not sure how long a program you want).

CK

Having watched all the titles on the videotape that you sent me, I really feel that the more the film focuses on you, the stronger it is. (ACR: I can have them mail the print of *Apologies*. That's a very popular film; that's shown a lot of places). That would be great; so, could you say something more about *Apologies* then?

ACR

I noticed that I apologized a lot; it was a reflex action. I started noticing EVERY WOMAN I KNEW said, "I'm sorry" just to kind of smooth the conversation out. I noticed my mother said, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." A couple of friends of mine who are fairly feminist had challenged me on it and said, "why should you?" and I found it really annoying of my mother. If you do anything...she almost demands an apology. (CK: Oh, she always demands an apology of you; it's not that she's always apologizing herself). She's always demanding an apology of me and she's always apologizing herself. She uses it both ways. She demands it and she does it. I once asked her why she says "I'm sorry" all the time and she said, "I have sorrow." I thought, "oh wow great!, this is depression. This is another way of masking the underlying depression." So, I thought of

all the apologies I ever would want to make and I said them in the course of a film. The thing is that sometimes people *laugh* at apologies that are *strictly* serious, like I say, "I apologize to all the starving children of the world, I'm sorry I spent the money on cigarettes instead." It's a sincere apology, but people laugh and it drives them bananas. The thing is one of the first times I screened that in New York City it was the weirdest thing. All the way through there are these props of coffee and cigarettes, in almost every scene I'm drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes, it used to drive me bananas because while I was screening it, I'd want to have a cigarette. If I couldn't smoke in the theater, I'd step outside. Well, I stepped outside and I sat down on a stoop of a door; a couple young women stood there and asked me if they could have a cigarette. I gave them a cigarette. They sat down next to me. They each had a cup of coffee. In the course of asking for a cigarette and sitting there just chatting about nothing they said "I'm sorry" about ten times; it just drove me bananas.

CK

This is during the screening of your film *Apologies*? That's just too ironic!

ACR

It's very ironic. I have since read little snippets of books about men and women, contrasting men and women. Actually, women do say, "I'm sorry" reflexively a lot more often than men do. The problem they get in when they're doing this with women, the women understand it's just kind of a polite something you say—it's reflexive, —*but the men take it seriously*.

CK

What does that lead to?

ACR

That leads to the men thinking the women are putting themselves down all the time. And a lower opinion of women. Men apologize *much less frequently*.

CK

Do you feel that this film *Apologies* enlightens its audience or that its even intended to educate its audience on this issue?

ACR

Basically, I did it to drive it out of me.

CK

Was it successful?

ACR

I do say at some points I want you...it's very strange because I'll say, "I want you to laugh, not apologize," but I'm *not smiling, I have an agonized look on my face*. There's this one scene that I put in in 1990, with no coffee or cigarettes, in this one room against a white wall, I'm dressed all in black, and the sound didn't come out. The recording of the sound didn't come out at all, so I played around with dubbing over. "I'm sorry for this, I'm sorry for that, I'm sorry for you, I'll apologize for everything, I'm so *mad* at you."

CK

It's about rage. It's articulating this nameless rage.

ACR

If you keep doing it, you're going to be extremely angry. It supposedly helps people get out of the cycle. *Suicide* got me out of the cycle. *Magazine Mouth* got me out of the cycle of binging.

CK

Let me ask you this: have feminist film theorists written about your work? Who has written about your work?

ACR

There's an Austrian who wrote a twenty-page psychological analysis of all these films, but it's all in German. I have absolutely no idea. They promised me a translation, but it's been about five years and they haven't sent me one yet.

CK

But as far as you know, your work hasn't been written about by any...

ACR

French, Austrian...I've gotten translations of the French and frankly it doesn't come across, you can't figure out what they're talking about.

CK

So, we need people in America to write about this work in terms of the history of experimental/avant-garde cinema, of personal filmmaking, of feminist filmmaking, of self-therapeutic...

ACR

It will all happen after I'm dead.

CK

In terms of exhibiting your work, what is the ideal context; if you could screen it in the setting and context of your choice, what would that be?

ACR

I don't know. As large an audience as possible. My preferred setting is solo, because I don't like group festivals. There's this big deal about people wanting psychotronics, explosives, psychodramas with a lot of sex and a lot of sadism—that creeps in. I've been in so many group festivals where I hate everything else on the program or I love everything, but they've sneaked in some *really weird film* that drives me bananas.

CK

Hahahaha. Well, as part of your Squeaky Wheel residency *you've* curated a program. Could you say something about the program you've put together, about the filmmakers?

ACR

Basically, it's films by filmmakers I admire. The only thing is I have kind of mixed feelings about Maya Deren.

CK

What are they?

ACR

She's supposedly the first avant-garde filmmaker and *At Land* was her first film, but I've seen other films of hers that I hate.

CK

What films do you hate?

ACR

*Meshes of the Afternoon*

CK

That's the most popular one. What do you hate about it?

ACR

*Her lying there at the end, glass all over her, as a victim. Oh, sick; sick, sick, sick! You don't need another film in which women are treated as the victim. I don't like the knives, that scene with her...no, no, no! I like At Land.*

CK

What do you like about *At Land*?

ACR

Well, for one thing it's really weird that she's out in the middle of the sand. I was out in the middle of Point Hatteras where the wind blows all the time, the sand dunes, sandstorms all the time, in the middle of a sandstorm sitting on a fence was a chess piece and I thought, "oh my god, the spirit of Maya Deren has come and put this chess piece!" This place is *scoured by sand*, the wind is constant, this little chess piece is so fragile and frail and it was *just sitting there* and I could have sworn that Maya Deren was on the earth and was there until five minutes before and had put that chess piece on, because some human being had walked along and put that chess piece there, and they had done it just a minute or so before we got there because the wind would have knocked it off, it would have gotten buried by sand, it was just so eerie. I feel connected to her.

CK

I wanted to ask you about filmmaking and your daily life. I know that you do a lot of gardening and that you live in the countryside of western Massachusetts....

ACR

In the suburbs. I maintain gardens here, but my garden out back is all weeds. The big vegetable garden I used to keep I don't keep it up as much as I used to.

CK

In recent years what role does your filmmaking play in terms of your daily life; how is it integrated into your day-to-day life?

ACR

I started a diary in 1981. It just continues.

CK

What's a typical day for you? How often do you pick up the camera?

ACR

Several times a week. At the beginning of the diary, it was daily, several times a day. Sometimes it still is like that.

CK

Your early films seem to have a really clear structure.

ACR

Well, most of my films except for the diary—the diary doesn't have a particularly clear structure, it just follows my life—and events happen and sometimes they're striking and the raps are important. Whenever I talk about something I usually encapsulate in talking about several months or weeks or days. Every film is very specific. There's thirty films in all outside the diary. The diary's about thirty-eight hours long.

CK

In terms of your process of making film...maybe you want to talk about your current process and if it's continuous or at all different from when you first started making films in terms of working very independently or in terms of working within a community of avant-garde filmmakers.

ACR

It's almost all independent. I've only asked someone to hold the camera maybe four or five times in twenty-five years.

CK

Earlier when you were in school you must have been part of a community of filmmakers, of people showing work to each other, talking about each other's work...

ACR

Mass College of Art there was a lot of that.

CK

How does it feel to have worked in that kind of close community setting and then...

ACR

I've only worked with a crew once. At Mass College of Art basically I found every time I did a new technique, they would find that all of a sudden, the students go to the student shows, if they see a technique they like, bingo! they start making films with that. For instance, I was making naked films, suddenly all the students were taking off their clothes. I was doing pixelation in which I moved myself back and forth in the frame alternatingly so it looks like there's two or three or four of me and all of a sudden students were doing that.

CK

So you felt like you were quite an influence on others, but that you weren't necessarily receiving anything back from them. Was there a creative exchange; what about with your professors?

ACR

They were showing Brakhage films; they influenced me to the point that you can take intimate pictures of other people, that you can focus on your family, that you can play around with filters. The reason I like Maya Deren is because she's a strong, independent one-person, she uses herself as an actress. This is very tempting, because you can always film when there's nobody around; as long as you have a cable release, you can do something. Margie Keller, she just does these very intimate portraits of things like houses and gardens and other people. I thought they were beautiful enough that I could

do the same thing. So, those people were influential on me. People back at Mass College of Art...I don't care for most films. I'm *really* picky. I'm *really* picky. If anybody does a film review I don't believe it.

CK

You don't believe it?

ACR

I don't believe it. The only thing I'll believe is Disney.

CK

Disney, why is that?

ACR

I take those to heart, because usually any film review of Disney is critical and I take the criticism to heart before I go to see it. Other films, serious films, people have a lot of stomach for violence I just don't have.

CK

Marjorie Keller, did she die in the '90s?

ACR

Yes, she died very suddenly. She was on vacation in Florida. Her mother came into the bathroom in the morning and Margie was lying dead on the floor. They never found a reason.

CK

Was she somebody whom you knew personally or whom you just knew through her filmmaking?

ACR

I knew through her filmmaking and also she had been one of the few women who had applied for a teaching post at Mass College of Art and I had been on the selection committee, so I saw a lot of her films that way.

CK

You were excited about the possibility of her joining...

ACR

And she was very, she was very, I don't know how you can say it, she supported me. In fact, she wanted to write about me. She was working on a book on feminism and filmmaking and she had interviewed me for it and asked me for copies of my films and things like that. She interviewed me several times over the telephone and she'd been helpful in getting me shows in New York City and all of a sudden bingo she died.

CK

Did anybody pick up her project, the book of interviews with women filmmakers?

ACR

I don't know. Her husband P. Adams Sitney, he teaches at Princeton now, he may have, I don't know, I don't know.

CK

But as far as you know nothing happened with the interview that she did of you?

ACR

No. All the work she had been doing just kind of disappeared.

CK

Anne, what are your ideas for your residency at Squeaky Wheel and how do you feel you'll benefit from it?

ACR

I've got about eleven videos. I want to get them onto disk. I was going to do just a diary of a residency and get that edited at the last minute and have some sort of a small, I don't know, probably not very long, but it would be my first digital video thing. I'd like to be able to borrow the camera almost every day. Have a camera for the use of the two weeks. The only thing is I'm computer-phobic. I like cameras, but I'm computer-phobic so I'm a little nervous about the editing.

CK

Somebody will teach you; you'll pick it up, you'll pick it up. I have another kind of odd question: what do you like to read, what reading materials do you have around your house?

ACR

Lately, I've gotten all these dog-gone subscriptions to magazines. I cannot keep up. I've got a nine-inch pile on the dining room table right now of magazines and these are just things like newsletters to organizations that I belong to and things like that. I try to keep up with *Time*. I tried to cancel *People*, but they keep sending it to me and I keep reading it. It's mainly right now it's been magazines, but I read a book that was edited by Jill Ker Conway. I'm not sure of the title, *In Her Own Right* or something like that, which was a whole bunch of autobiographies of famous women like Margaret Sanger, from former slaves going all the way through Maya Angelou, etc., etc., Margaret Bourke White, people like that. She basically condensed them. What it made me want to do is go out and read the original, the longer version; they were fascinating. I'm a *weird* Catholic. I was raised Unitarian, but I always wanted to be a Catholic. I don't know why. Around 1990 I started getting instruction in Catholicism and in 1992 I was baptized Catholic. Well, sometimes I go to church and sometimes I get so mad at the church that I can't go. Right now I'm in a phase of I'm really mad at the church, because the Pope was calling for the forgiveness of bishops in Rwanda. The parishioners would go to a bishop and say, "please protect us." He would say, "okay, I'll give you amnesty in the church, go into the church," and then he would call the police and the police would come and shoot everybody in the church.

CK

Why would the bishop do that?

ACR

Why would the bishop do that? *Who knows?* Because he was Hutu and he wanted to kill Tutsis, or he was Tutsi and he wanted to kill Hutus, one or the other. These are all black bishops and they just participated in the slaughter and the Pope is calling, "forgive! forgive! forgive!"

CK

I need to get off the phone.

ACR

Well, anyway I just got three beautiful books with icons by a couple of icon painters and they're written by Daniel Berrigan and a couple of other artists. There are icons and poems and discussions and prayers and things like that about these various saints and figures and portraits of Mary in various aspects. I'm really enjoying them.

CK

I just have one final question. What do you think about the US bombing of Afghanistan that's going on currently?

ACR

They're calling the damage to civilians "collateral damage" just like Timothy McVeigh. They're such poor shots they bombed the International Red Cross twice. I don't go as far as Joe Gibbons as saying that that was deliberate, but they're really bad shots. By the end of this, if they haven't killed five thousand civilians, I'll be surprised. I don't see the point of it. I mean we're supposedly not going to kill civilians, *but we are*. We've dropped enough food for one percent of the need, those darn food packages we drop are food that they don't want to eat and they're getting sold on the black market. We'd do better in trucking in food that they would eat and not spending the money on these ridiculous food drops which make us look so good but are just getting to one percent of the population and that one percent is feeding them to the donkeys!

© Caroline Koebel and Anne Charlotte Robertson 2010