

## Arena

Edited transcript of interviews with the artist from the 1993 documentary film directed by Nigel Finch for Arena Films, London, and broadcast by BBC2.

[Text scrolled on screen and read aloud by the artist:]

### The Contract

Notwithstanding any other provision in the contract which refers to editorial control, it is understood that the artist shall have the final authority to include, expunge, revise, or otherwise change any statement made by her, and or any image of her, without qualification, with the artist having the final right of approval.

*Well, I can't agree to that.*

Don't be like that. Don't say that. You're just trying to make a fool of me.

*No, I'm not.*

Yes, you are, you are not succeeding but you are trying.

*What I don't understand is, and I'm going to say it again . . .*

But if you don't understand something, don't put it completely on me. Maybe you cannot understand. Don't make me say it six times. I repeat myself all the time.

*What it is I'm trying to understand is what it is you're so worried about. What it is you're resisting, really.*

[Bourgeois holds up a sign:] "NO TRESPASSING"

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I'm not a person of pure color any more. The change happened in 1993, when I realized that life was not a matter of black and white, of pure blue and pure red. Life is a matter of giving in as you know. I've just given in to you. So I am just an example of what I say. As I always say I am not what I say, I am what I do.

[Setting a moderate rate on a metronome in the artist's studio] I find this completely relaxing, that this is my rhythm today, at this time of the day. It is eleven o'clock [in the morning] and since I have an hourly rhythm, eleven

o'clock is my best time and the rhythm is this, quite fast. Now, when you're sick and tired of the whole day—you see how tired the rhythm is? [Slowing the metronome]—and when you have a cup of coffee or something to eat of some kind, you hear [Speeding up the metronome], that's awful. At eleven o'clock that's awful, so [the metronome] allows me some self-knowledge. I just put it on and I find my rhythm. This is it [Returning to a moderate rate], at this level we are in business, you can talk to me.

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[In the studio, after smashing a ceramic vase on the floor, the artist stamps on the broken pieces.] This is this, yes? You make yourself understood, right? Look at this here. So you start to exist then. [Pause] Way back I could never fight an argument with my father, because either he made fun of me, of my being only a girl, or he made fun of me—just a minute now—he made fun of me because he had a cruel sense of humor and I could not answer it. I could not make myself understood, and I could not answer him. And the frustration, instead of turning into a running-away masculine thing, the frustration was a kind of stiffening, like this [Clenching fist], and keeping the resentment inside and twenty-five years later I have not come to terms with my resentment which is there forever.

[Begins stamping again] That's it. Now if you do not let me have the last word at least once in a while, then everything goes. [Pointing to broken pieces on the floor] Doing that gives me pleasure, there's no nonsense about that. I'm sorry later, but on the spot it does give me pleasure. [Picking up metal object] Now something that you *cannot* destroy, you know that? You want to break this? [Throws object across the floor] It does not break! You *never* have the last word. OK. That's it. [Bourgeois leaves the interview.]

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*Tell me about the significance of cutting for you.*

Cutting—it means being in total control. Accepting the total control of whatever happens and it is quite aggressive and sometimes I wake up in

the morning and I do not feel up to cutting. And I do not feel up to dealing with the machinery. Then I will draw, you have to be quite sure to operate mechanical tools, electric tools.

*Does this relate in some way to the Cell (Arch of Hysteria) (1992)?*  
What do you mean by that? I guess you mean something. What do you mean?

*I'm interested in the ...*

Well, you certainly cannot be hysterical and use—if you want to keep all your fingers—and use power tools.

*Because cutting seems an act of violence in a lot of your work. You cut arms off, you cut heads off, you dismember.*

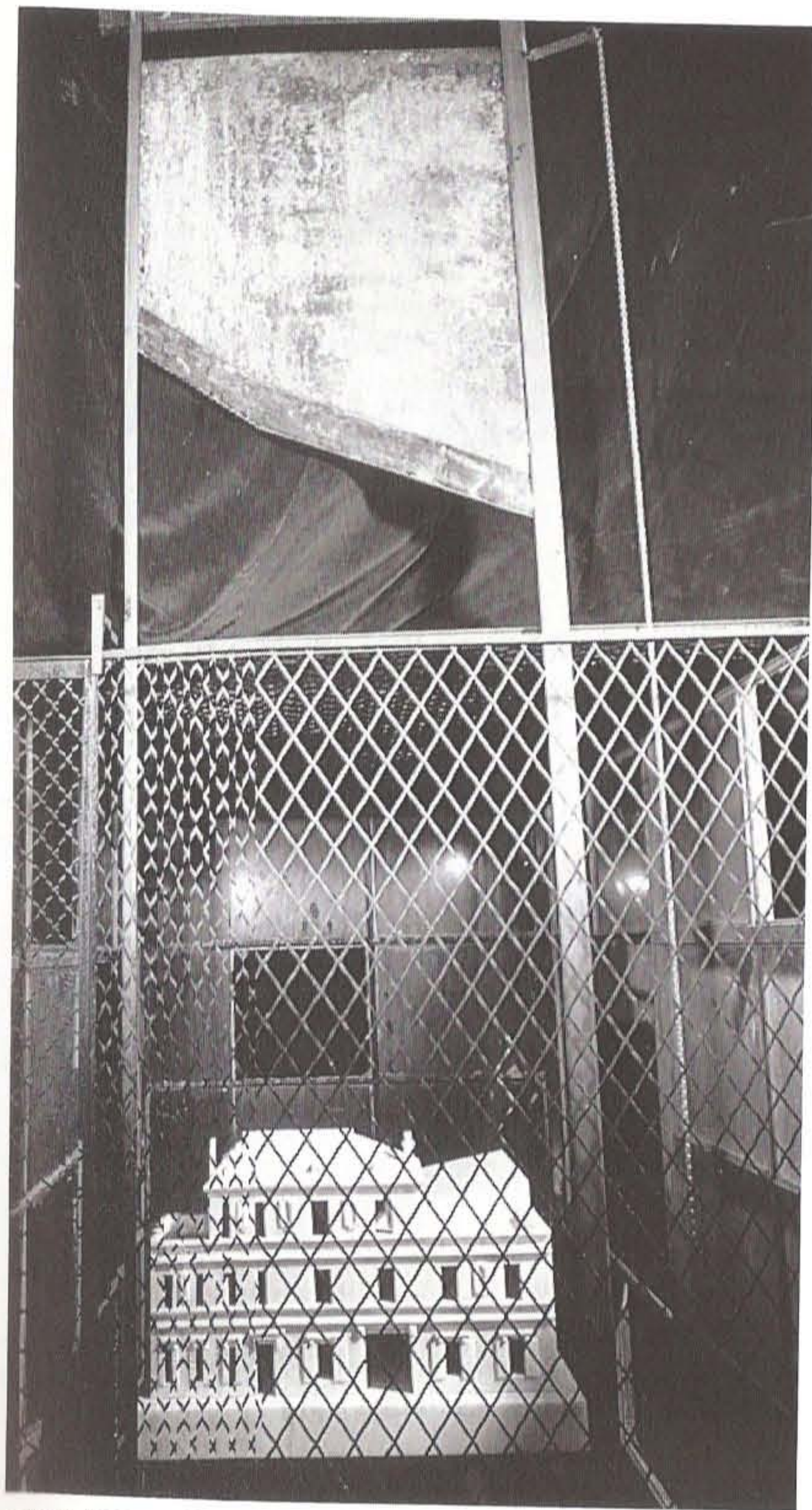
Don't you cut your lunch up when you're ready to eat it? Is that a crime? I'm a vegetarian, but you're not a vegetarian, no, you have lamb chops over and over again. Prawns, these prawns that you ate the other day without even noticing that they were not too good, so you were quite ...

*They made me ill?*

That's right. You were too clever for your own good. What I enjoy also, which is not aggressive, it is not protective, it is just inventive ... for instance, here [Referring to a sculpture in the studio] you have two dimensions, that is to say you have the height and you have the width. And why not add an extra dimension which would make it better, which would make it richer, and which is so terribly simple that a child could do it? I'm not going to destroy this piece to show you what I mean, but all that is done is this. All that is done is to open it up like this, and you have a sphere, suddenly you have a sphere, whereas you only had a circle before. This is why I could not be a painter. The two dimensions do not satisfy me. I have to have the reality given by the third dimension.

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We have the sweat, the tears, the snot, the saliva, the ear lubricant, the bile, the urine, the milk, the pus, the semen, and the blood. The piece *Precious Liquids* (1992) is about a girl growing up and finding passion



*Cell (Choisy)* 1990–3, glass and marble, 302.3 × 368.3 × 304.8 cm. Collection: Yusef Karami Foundation, Beirut.

instead of terror. She stops being afraid and she knows passion. The little dress taking refuge in the big coat represents the child who has undergone strong and frightened emotions. The big coat is a metaphor for the unconscious. She takes refuge the same way that artists take refuge in the unconscious. I feel at peace with my unconscious. I trust it, I may find it embarrassing, but I cannot go wrong.

[On *Cell (Choisy)* (1990–3):] This is the house in Choisy. This is the house where we lived and where the tapestry workshops occupied the second wing of the house here and there were twenty-five *petits mains*, which worked on the tapestry. The family lived there and today, today, of course it was demolished, and it became for me the symbol, as you see up there, of the past being gotten rid of by the present. The present destroys the past every day. And that cruelty is expressed by the guillotine.

*Why is the house in this enclosure, Louise? Why are there all these enclosures?*

It is enclosed because it belongs to a certain little section of the past and for this past to be eradicated. To have really gone through an exorcism, in order to liberate myself from the past, I have to reconstruct it, ponder about it, make a statue out of it and get rid of it through making sculpture. I'm able to forget it afterward. I have paid my debt to the past and I'm liberated.

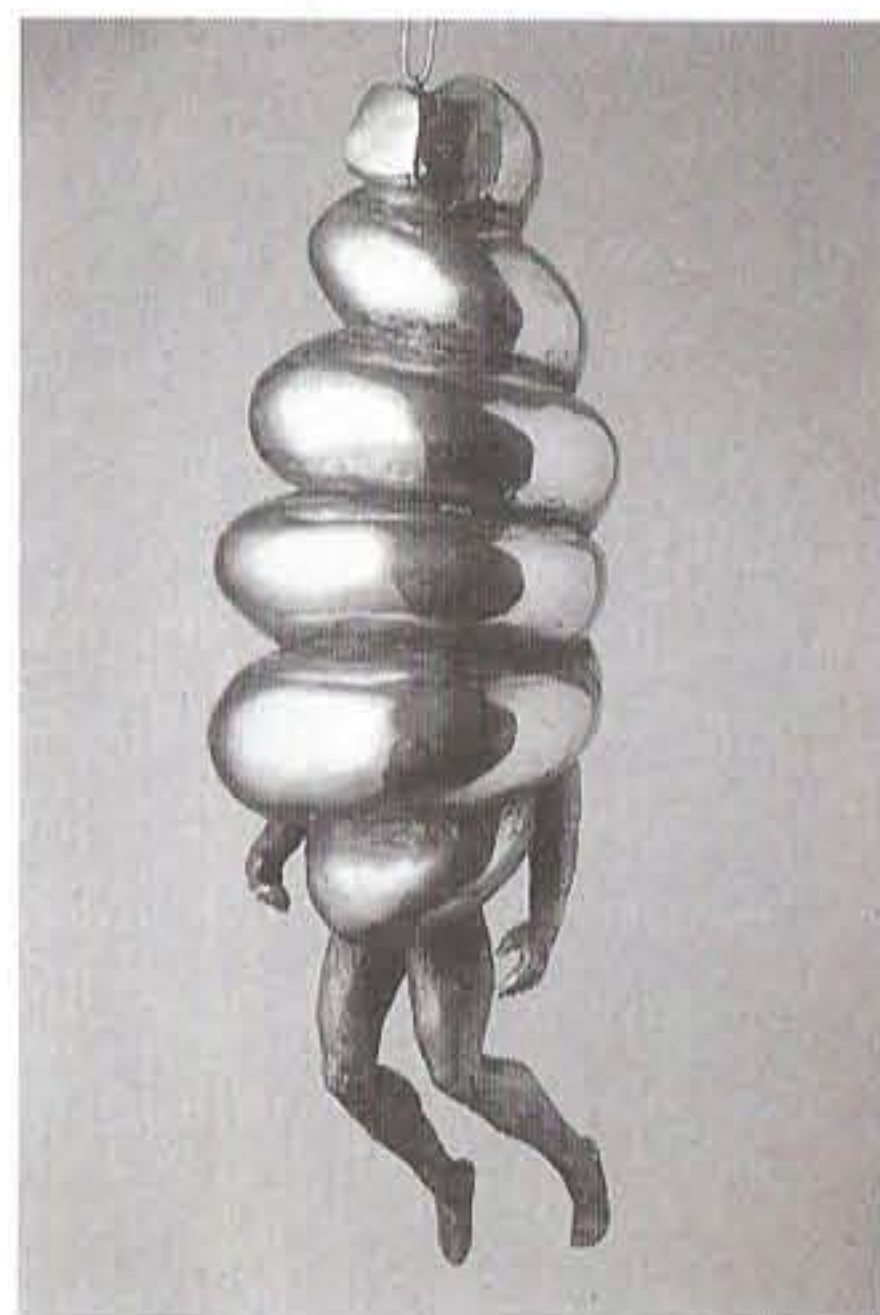
*But this is like a prison...*

Yes, it is. It is because I'm a prisoner of my memories. I have been a prisoner of my memories and my aim is to get rid of them.

\* \* \*

[Holding up a small new sculpture, made in the kitchen of the artist's home, similar to *Spiral Woman* (1984)] This is a figure, the head is here, the head fell off. It doesn't matter. It falls off, I put it back. The little legs hold like this here, there it is, you see the little figure emerging. So this little figure is supposed to hang, and this little figure is disoriented. This is what it means:

She hangs up in the air. She turns around and she doesn't know her left from her right. Who do you think it represents? It represents Louise. This is the way I feel. It doesn't mean that she is ugly, right? It doesn't mean that she is bad. It doesn't mean that she is useless. It just means that she is herself, hanging, waiting for nobody knows what. But it still has a value because for me it gives me the means to say what I feel like, what it is to be a widow, for instance. So you have all these tools, you get to be very good at it, you know, you get to do what you want to do. You get to say what you want to say. You remember "the pushover"? Well, when I deal with this I am not a pushover any more.



*Spiral Woman*, 1984, bronze, 35.5 x 11.4 x 13.9 cm. Private Collection.

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The whole performance [*A Banquet/A Fashion Show of Body Parts*, Hamilton Gallery, New York, 1978] was about being abandoned. It is the voice of an older person who has been abandoned by their children, left alone by their children. But it is also the opposite: it is the abandonment of the very young child by the elders. And it is here the second interpretation. It is that Sadie was called in to take care of me and she came under false pretence and she was not interested in me at all. She was interested in sleeping with my father, and I experienced the tragedy of the abandonment.

Lots of parents feel abandoned, right? Which is something that I do not know. This is not in my experience. I experience the other one. I experienced being abandoned as a child. [Sings] "She abandoned me." One day I will sing it.

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[In the studio, with a plaster cast of *She-Fox* (1985)] I want to destroy it, completely deconstruct it. But believe it or not, it is not going to break. I have to do it six times! I cannot pretend that it doesn't give me pleasure. It gives me a *lot* of pleasure. Except that there is a time for everything. First it gives me pleasure, then I fall into a depression. [Violently pushes sculpture off its table and it crashes on the floor] There it is! And dealing with depression is something that we really ought not to talk about.

*Do you use anger in a creative way?*

I use anger and it is a raw emotion. It is my way of defending myself. Sometimes it frightens people, but it really doesn't frighten people. People take you for a pushover, do you see? You can always destroy her by making her angry and then you get what you want. Now without being personal, I would say that Nigel Finch has done it to me. He made me angry when it was the time to talk about the contract. He pushed me so much that I did get angry and then he got what he wanted, that is to say, the absence [of a contract]. So I am a real pushover, but I know that, which doesn't fix things; it makes things even worse. [Leaving the studio] So do you know that I don't have a contract? I come back to say that because now the anger has gone and things are smashed so I can talk nicely. I work with Nigel, who is a friend of mine, without a contract, right? He took me for a pushover and I was a pushover. That's because I am sorry to have been angry. Do you understand or do you want me to say it again?

\* \* \*



Susan Cooper sings "She Abandoned Me" during the performance *A Banquet/A Fashion Show of Body Parts* (in the artist's installation *Confrontation*) at the Hamilton Gallery, New York, 21 October 1978.

So many times in my work I have tried to devastate a man who is called *l'homme à femme*. That is to say, a man who gets ahead in life through women. I've something against them. I don't know what it is, but I have something against them, and I want to prove that they are fools, they are damn fools. That is why the work looks the way it does. What I have against it is that they really do enjoy themselves, they really do have a good time.

*Who are these l'homme à femme?*

*L'homme à femme, l'homme à femme*, that is to say, the man—I'm sorry, I don't know how to translate it.

*A man and woman, but who are they?*

No, *L'homme à femme* means... the Don Juan complex, that's it, and at the end of his life—I don't know my literature in [this subject] too well—but I think at the end he is not satisfied. Doesn't he burn in hell or something? Well he should. I won't be sorry for him.

*I sometimes think you don't like men very much.*

Well, that is your interpretation. You are entitled to your interpretation, right? Why should I say that I disagree? What for? So, I'll say talk for yourself. [Holds up mirror in front of interviewer's face] Talk for yourself.

*You use that as a defense each time.*

Absolutely. Who are you to ask me? Who are you? Do you think you're God or something?

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*Can I ask you about mirrors, Louise?*

Right.

*Why are mirrors so important to you?*

Mirror means the acceptance of the self. So, I have lived in a house without mirrors because I couldn't stand, I couldn't accept myself. The mirror was an enemy. Now, the mirror cannot be your enemy, the mirror has to be your friend, otherwise you are badly off. So instead of seeing the mirror as a symbol of vanity—no danger there—I saw the mirror as a symbol of acceptance. So that when I hold the mirror to you, when the critics and

the interviewers and the film-makers come and they ask me inappropriate questions, I take my mirror and I hold it up to them and I say don't project on me. You see this mirror here? It is not out of vanity—it is a deforming mirror. It doesn't reflect me, it reflects somebody else. It reflects a kind of monstrous image of myself. So I can play with that.

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*Are these eyes that you are leaning on [Cell (Eyes and Mirrors) (1989–93)]?*

Whether they are eyes that see the reality of things or whether they are eyes that see your fantasy... A second symbol is the rock: not only is it marble—marble is sugar really in terms of stones; these are granite. So the quality of your eyes and the strength of your eyes are expressed here in granite. Nobody is going to keep me from seeing what is, instead of what I would like. And that includes you. That is all I want to say, thank you.

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All my work is suggestive; it is not explicit. Explicit things are not interesting because they are too cut and dried and without mystery. All this is subject to your interpretation, to your vision. [Looking at a sculpture in progress] This is a very important piece for me... I do not have artists come here because any artist worth his salt will look at this and think, "Gee, there is something cooking here. I don't know what she means, I don't know what it means, but there is an energy. There is an energy here that I can feed upon." I put such value and such energy and such work that I don't want any creepers to come and be inspired by my work. I don't need that, I don't need admirers, I don't need fans. That's not my bag. I don't want to be disturbed, you understand. If I am in the process of working on this theme, I do not want to be disturbed. That's all I say. I cannot afford to be disturbed. I am a long-distance runner. It takes me years and years and years to produce what I do. I am a long-distance runner and I am also a lonely runner and that's the way I want it.

*The work is being shown in Venice. Is the Venice Biennale an important exhibition for you? Personally?*

Personally? Personally, no exhibition is important. The progression in the work is important. The self-knowledge that I get and that all artists get—I'm not special—the self-knowledge is its own reward. A show is just a show. As proven by the fact that much as I like my dealer in Paris, you know that character, Karsten Greve. Well I like him very much.

Everybody likes him. But when he said you have to come to my show, he said, "I want you at the show," and I said, "What for? The show is not me. The show is the work, right?" So he pushed an ultimatum on me. He said if you do not come to the show I'm going to do this, and this, and I said, "OK, if you want to commit suicide over the show, go ahead." I cannot be responsible for his problems and I didn't show up. And in Venice, if you tell me, I'm not going to Venice. What for? It's all in a day's work. What is important is that we are *ready* for Venice. That is important, that things are finished, polished, perfect. But to be there as a fashion plate? I am not a fashion plate.

*Have you finished now?*

Yes, I am finished, thank you. [Smiling, looking towards window] The light is nice here.