

Punched card
Arisa Purkpong

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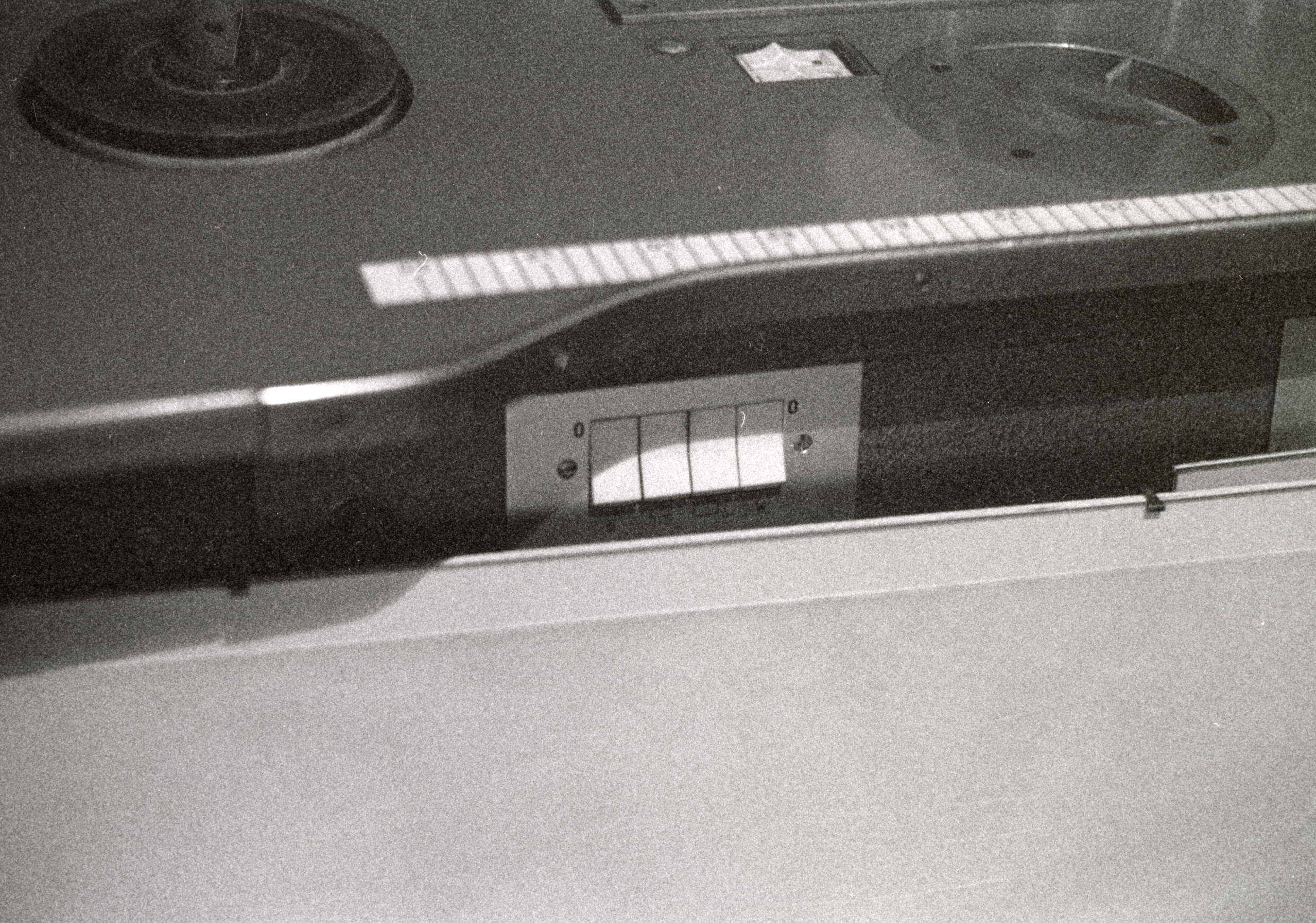
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Conversation Between Claudia von Alemann and Arisa Purkpong: *Blind Spot*

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Arisa Purkpong: Before the conversation, you had already talked about the fact that your film *Blind Spot* is not only about Flora Tristan, but also about a search: Elisabeth, the protagonist, travels to Lyon to find traces of Tristan. She searches and this search leads nowhere. I liked that you mentioned this, because when I watched the film for the first time, and then a second and third time, I thought to myself: what is she looking for and where does this quest lead? That question kept recurring. At the same time, the film has a nonlinear narrative structure, it's very figurative, and it also includes many scenes of the city of Lyon itself. In this film, one is somewhat on this search, and my first question would be how the script for the film and the whole idea for it came about. How did that turn into the film?

Claudia von Alemann: Well, I had actually prepared a completely different film, and then it ultimately became this film, because I wanted to make a classic feature film for the first time. I had previously made experimental films and documentaries and now I wanted to create that one very big historical work, in other words, I wanted to extend my ideas in a baroque way. I lived in Paris for years and worked in a fairly unknown feminist archive that had existed since 1900 or 1910, but that nobody knew about. There I researched, researched, researched and constantly worked on Flora Tristan and the early utopian socialists because they fascinated me and proclaimed a utopian socialism that had not existed in the sense of classical Marxism, but which had influenced the early German socialists - they were influenced considerably by France and the ideas of Henri de Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier. So I exclusively researched about women in this archive and in the process I came

across Flora Tristan who had been completely forgotten at that time, even in France - not anymore today, but at that time between 1974 and '78 it was completely forgotten and I only got hold of this diary *Le Tour de France* coincidentally, which just, as I say in the film or respectively Elisabeth says, had been forgotten and not published for 129 years. It simply did not exist. So I wanted to make a historical feature film in a classical manner. I had a French co-producer and a West German producer, namely ZDF [Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen, second public service television station in Germany], *das große Fernsehspiel*, and they were supposed to form a co-production. That was the agreement and they had given me one and a half million DM, which of course was a lot of money for me at the time, and I had written a script that had 200 pages. It was a dense book and we translated it into French with Coline Serreau. Anyway, the leading role was intended for Marie-France Pisier and the two supporting roles were to be played by Margarethe von Trotta as an actress and Angela Winkler. So, it was actually the story of three women who existed historically and were important as they published the first women's magazine *La Femme Libre* in 1832. I prepared all of this elaborately. A huge team, a huge cast. Then everything fell through in the winter of 1977 and was cancelled by ZDF, and the French co-producer could no longer take on the co-production and I was suddenly without money and without a project and I fell into a terrible depression. I was completely desperate and wanted to take my own life. But then I realized that I was pregnant and then I couldn't bear to take my own life knowing I would be taking the lives of two people... so anyway, I saw that as a sign to find a way out of my depression which surfaced when I couldn't make that one film. That it was completely idiotic to kill yourself because you can't make a film. I realized that and thought, as revenge, I'll make a completely different film now. For three years I had written a 200-page script with an infinite number of roles and costumes and everything that exists in a historical feature film. And then I thought I'll do the exact opposite now: I'll write ten pages in 14 days and cast it with completely unknown actors and actresses and shoot it exclusively in Lyon because that's where Flora Tristan's last stop of her "Union ouvrière" was, well, her activity with the workers on site. I decided that the diary *Le Tour de France*, was an incredibly interesting guideline and I wanted to refer to it. But I definitely didn't want to portray a militant feminist and activist as an actress, but rather a kind of passivity, so to speak, that is, a very quiet woman who, for completely inexplicable reasons, leaves her husband and child behind and sets off for Lyon

without intention or goal really. She should in no way falsely imitate what the extremely active, courageous as well as authoritarian and in her diary sometimes very, very vicious and sarcastic Flora Tristan did. I wanted to create the antagonist who is not passive, even if you think so at the beginning, but one who absorbs everything she encounters like a sponge and who basically zigzags around the idea that the journey is the reward and actually achieves little of what she wanted to achieve, but always comes across other exciting events in the story and then holds on to them.

AP: How did you then try to implement that practically, or cinematically – well, the story moves in a zigzag, but there is still a structure, meaning a beginning and an end?

CvA: Yeah, I had some kind of script of ten or twelve pages and kept writing throughout the shoot and developing and suggesting things at night. Rebecca Pauly, who plays Elisabeth, is a violinist and studied music in San Francisco and in Aix-en-Provence but then quit that. I later met her as a theatre actress. For the end of the film, of which we didn't know what it was going to be for a long time, I had her perform the exercises she usually does in this waiting room. As for the others, there was a variety of people, such as Denise Péron, who plays the bistro hostess, and also Jean Badin, who plays the young man, and others played themselves. Very consciously, for example, the antiquarian. There was a lot of trial and error, a lot of coincidence. When writing such a short script, I also wanted to be flexible and accept that my actors do something else, and they did. The antiquarian did her own thing and didn't stick at all to what I had written for her. Of course, Rebecca had to react to this and Jean Badin also simply did what he wanted, which I think turned out well. Others had dialogues assigned by me, but it was highly amusing! Also, because we were a relatively small team. There is an incredibly large number of names listed in the credits, because we shot for two years, more specifically within two summers. Of course, you shouldn't notice that. But there was no other way because first of all, I was pregnant in the first summer, so I was at the end of the sixth month and I really shouldn't have been shooting at all, but I thought, "Pregnant doesn't equal being sick, so I'm shooting now," but also because of Rebecca Pauly since she had commitments at the theatre. So we shot the end of the story a year later, again in August (meanwhile my child was nine months old and I had her with me during the shoot). That's how the relatively large

team originated, which is mentioned at the end, but actually we were much fewer people, of course, and I was also the producer, which certainly wasn't easy because I had to keep the money together as there were only two sums: One from the Federal Ministry of the Interior [Bundesinnenministerium] and one from the *Kuratorium Junger Deutscher Film*, which was very important for all of us at the time since they contributed money for someone's first feature film. The first feature film and nothing else. Back then with 120,000 DM. That means I only had a total of 370,000 DM with which you can't actually shoot a feature film but I managed to do it.

AP: The fact that the film has evolved during all this time is very exciting to me. You've already talked about the collaboration with the actors. Was the collaboration, for example, with Hille Sagel, the cinematographer, similar?

CvA: What fascinated me about Hille Sagel was that she had studied painting before studying film and camera. A critic once claimed that her pictures looked like still lives, like "nature morte" as they say in French. She and I worked a lot on the framing and discussed that endlessly, sometimes we even argued about how to define the framing, so about every image and every movement, which are deliberately rare in the film. But for instance, we spent a very long time working on this 360-degree pan shot in the bistro, and she did it brilliantly, I think. I shot more films with her later on. The additional sound, so everything that wasn't recorded in the original sound, on site, was recorded by Daniel Deshay and me and a lot of work was done in the mixing and sound editing. At that time, the task for Daniel was, for example: "I need a train at night and dogs barking". These additional recordings could have been taken from some archive, of course, but I wanted it to be very precise because I think a train at night sounds different than a train during the day. I was obsessed with the sounds of the trains and I also wanted the dogs to bark at the same time and not have them synthesized or built in from the archive. Therefore, Daniel drove around the area and recorded that one annoying bird at the funeral scene or that thunderstorm when she's lying in bed. Anyway, I just have a fondness for sound, for original sound and music and mixed forms. In the scene in the bistro, there are these men and this one woman, that's kind of like a Greek choir for me. In one version of the film they're translated, but that's nonsense, because they're just supposed to be like a Greek choir, which feels lonely and is also in a crisis, and they constitute a kind of home in that

way. They are playing Belote in the scene they actually always did that in this bistro anyway and then I just included that in the film since we didn't have the money to close off the whole bistro for the permanent guests.

There is also the moment in the waiting room where the protagonist eats the bread and Kathleen Ferrier, one of my favourite sopranos, sings Handel. The rest of the music was played by the cellist Frank Wolf. In fact, he improvised at the editing table at my request until we were both satisfied. Frank improvised on the cello while the two children were crawling around on the floor and he later repeated and recorded these pieces he had improvised in the recording studio.

AP: I just saw that there is already a question from the audience.

Question from the audience: Basically, it seems as if the sound, i.e. the noises in the background, should almost be perceived as music. I found it very interesting that the dialogue in the weaving mill is not audible and that you can only hear the almost musical whirring of the weaving machines. So actually, I didn't have a real question, I just found that a really great detail.

CvA: Well, that was the last real weaver in the weavers' district. I got to know him because I was still looking for real weavers - regarding the history of the workers' movement in Lyon, there were famous silk weaver uprisings in 1831, 1834 and 1848, and this was incredibly important in the history of the French workers' movement and influenced Flora Tristan in her writings as well. Later also Marx and Engels, but anyway, there were already no more weavers in 1978/79 and everything was synthetically produced in factories. Flora Tristan often mentions how noisy these Jacquard looms are. These special looms are incredibly high and so the houses in the weaving district La Croix-Rousse in Lyon, also had very high ceilings. I deliberately wanted the loom to be as loud as Flora Tristan describes it, so that the dialogue cannot be understood at all, even if this may irritate some people. It was about this noise, this symphony of this loom, with its shuttles and the punched cards. The weaver says that he has been working on his loom for 32 years but the dialogue is not important. What is important is this indescribable noise in which people had to work at that time. It was really fun to get these people involved. Yeah, then you just need to improvise and try to make everyone happy, like for example in the bistro, I couldn't and didn't want to kick the regular guests out, and that's why at the

end I said to the three old men: “I have to do some filming here. Why don’t you talk again about what you’re cooking for yourselves for dinner?” All three of them were bachelors, as I had been told during the breaks, and then they quickly improvised on how and what food they would make for themselves. Of course, I find that incredibly funny.

AP: I was wondering how you made decisions in the editing process for the many scenes where you spontaneously changed or added something? I imagine that it’s difficult to decide what is going to be used and in what way. So actually, the question is: What is going to be part of the film?

CvA: Yes, that was very difficult. It was a very long process, which in turn was obviously expensive for me. But I met Monique Dartonne there, with whom I then edited several other films. I think she’s absolutely brilliant. She was a cutter or editor, as they say now, and we were lucky enough to be able to work on it for a long time, because we had rented a relatively inexpensive editing room, where the child crawled around again on the floor and picked up the pieces of film. Monique and I then actually developed the sequence of the story. Of course the beginning was perfectly clear. Some of the cineastes amongst you will certainly notice that I’m a friend of Sergio Leone’s western *Once Upon a Time in the West*. I just wanted a man like that to arrive at a train station in Arizona, and then the story begins. But I finally wanted to show a woman arriving at an abandoned and decaying train station. And a woman arrives at this abandoned train station. Why? Where from? Nobody knows. And then the story begins. I just wanted to do that in revenge against the dramaturgy of those films, which I otherwise certainly love. I love Italian Western films and such classic films, and I wanted this female character to arrive there all alone. The rest of the story had to be reassembled, because the order was not clear, except that she should definitely have a crisis at some point. In addition, there was supposed to be an implied love story, whether it continues or not is not said, it’s all left open. Apart from that, the hotel was really great. We were there recently, and it’s a very chic hotel today. Back then, it was a hotel for artists and actors, and the floorboards creaked just as insanely. We just had to put up with that. That’s where we all lived and shot the film, and of course the hotel was very supportive and didn’t request too much from us. So the starting points were clear: the bistro, the hotel, the waiting room, which serves as a kind of shelter for a woman who has left

everything behind and is also lonely and not always entirely happy, and where she even eats this terrible sandwich then. All that was clear. And then the rest we developed in editing. But if you have a producer and they don’t allow you to edit for that long, then of course that doesn’t work. So that was the fortune of financial hardship, the fortune that I was the producer and that I had to get by with this money somehow and therefore could edit longer and of course still pay Monique. However, I didn’t pay myself. Well, that’s how it is when you want to be independent.

AP: I saw that there was another question.

Question from the audience: I’m actually interested in the autobiographical aspects – are there any?

CvA: [laughs] Yes, they are certainly very, very present. Except that I didn’t leave my husband and child but always carried the child around with me like a kangaroo. It was autobiographical in the sense that I wanted to describe a woman who doesn’t outwardly run around in an activist and militant manner but who is actually shy and reserved and quiet, very quiet, and perhaps also depressed or introverted, which also applies to me to some extent. And who embarks on a somewhat unreasonable adventure, that is, to search for traces of Flora Tristan in this city without much money, but in reality always finds something else. One must first dare to do that, one must embark on it. Another important thing for me to mention is that the historian in the film was an actual historian, and I had also given him a different text than the one he ends up saying in the film. In the film you can see that he’s always looking down at my text. He couldn’t read it properly and then improvised from what I had told him before. Of course, he has an unfortunate role, because he is an accomplished and very well-known historian and I had told him beforehand: “You must claim that you don’t know Flora Tristan at all”. But he accepted that. And then I said that the historian should not put himself in the spotlight but should remain behind the writings and documents, so behind the, let’s say, “good and neutral” science, which has the effect that one remembers. But she, this young woman, who makes these absurd footprint recordings on her tape recorder and he asks what they are, wants to perceive the sensual reality in a completely different way and reassemble it associatively in her head and research it in a different, “unscientific” way. That is the purpose of this film

and also my purpose, my intention. And that's why I had once written something called *Women Remember Differently* [Frauen erinnern sich anders]. How can women or how do women want to remember differently? Which obviously doesn't mean that I would reject scientific, historical work, but there is also a counter-world or counter-appearance of women who want to remember in a different way than just through papers and official historiography.