

The gifts of respect (shoes) and home

Alanis Obomsawin in Conversation with Alexandra Juhasz on the event of her retrospective at HKV Berlin, “The Children Have to Hear Another Story,” April 3, 2022



Alex: Hi Alanis. We're going to start with your survey and end with shoes.

Alanis: Amazing. I love shoes. I love your shoes.

Alex: I love your shoes, too.

Alanis: The two pairs that I saw of yours, I have one that is very close to it.

Alex: You do?

Alanis: It's blue. Not navy blue, but almost navy blue. And it's got lace like yours. And, it's this high and so comfortable.

Alex: You must send me a picture of your blue ones. We just met in Berlin on the occasion of your retrospective, a comprehensive survey of your work as a filmmaker and also as a visual artist: [The Children Have to Hear Another Story](#). Have you ever had a survey of this magnitude?

Alanis: Oh, no. I've had exhibitions sometimes of just of my etchings. Over the years, I've had a few retrospectives and it was very nice. But this, I've never had this kind of attention. And from so far away!

Alex: What does it feel like for you to see and experience the comprehensive nature of the show, one that travels over decades, to another continent, and over a very long, ambitious, and productive career? For women, such recognition often comes "too late."¹ But in your case, perhaps just in time, especially as the show will continue to move homewards, it's next stop being at the [Vancouver Art Museum](#), Canada, 2023.

Alanis: I'm really very, very surprised. I never expect anything. I was making films. I never thought of awards. I didn't even know about that. And, I'm always questioning, do I deserve this? But I keep thinking, here, about my father who died when I was 12 years old. And, he made a lot of fuss about very simple little things. And I keep thinking, I wish he was here. I wonder what he would say. He wouldn't believe it.

Alex: If you weren't motivated by prizes, what was your motivation and what continues to be your motivation?

Alanis: I'm motivated by the life of our people and especially children to make a better place for them than I have had. I just don't want other children to go through what I did, because it's not right. I work to show them that they're all important and they count and I think they're beautiful. I want people to be allowed to be as and where they are and feel comfortable in everything, which means life. Life is very sacred for all people. And when I say sacred, I mean, you're not allowed to take the dignity away from a human being or even an animal ... all that lives. And, we have had bad times for many generations in terms of human beings.

Alex: Can you reflect upon what it means to bring that proposal about life, one you've expressed over and over in your art, to another continent and nation? To bring it to Berlin? To explore your position about North American Indigenous life in another location, on another continent?

Alanis: I am very touched by their interest, that other people who don't even know us have that kind of interest and are so respectful. And I come here, and I see all these films, but it's all the people in them that count. I'm just a tool. It just shows the value and the mind of our people,

¹ "For Feminist Artists, Recognition Often Comes Too Late," *Hyperallergic*, February 1, 2021: <https://hyperallergic.com/617414/for-feminist-artists-recognition-often-comes-too-late>.

how they are. And I think they're beautiful and they have so much about themselves. To be recognized by a country outside like this, it's such a gift.

Alex: We talked about gifts yesterday: in your films, the gifts of listening and the gifts of time. In my work, I have made histories of feminists who have been engaged in filmmaking from the beginning. I have a book and a documentary, *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Media*,² where I listen to women explain their diverse feminist media histories.

Alanis: I'd love to read it.

Alex: I will gift it to you [author's note: this gift was mailed to Alanis in Montreal in April 2022]. How do you think about yourself in relationship to the history of women's involvement or feminist involvement in film? Do you connect to that legacy or are there other legacies or traditions that really empower your career over the decades?

Alanis: I never even think of a career. It's more like a mission. I fought very hard to be able to make these documentaries. And for me the fight is about the importance of the people, not my career. So many of our people feel very shy, almost as if they don't deserve attention. And I want to change that. That's why I keep saying the voice is so sacred because when you're just having a conversation with someone, you hear the voice and it's so special, it's so beautiful because through the recounting of something perhaps important, perhaps not, as a story, the sound of the voice changes. It changes from what they're going through in their minds, thinking and telling. And I just have so much respect for that. I think it's so beautiful. And it happens all the time. They're revealing something more profound and I always feel very lucky to hear. I learn all the time and from people's experience: how they survive in their own country that was so unfriendly to them, and the older people are the most interesting.

Alex: For sure. That's why I'm listening to you. I have interviewed many important women filmmakers as they age, and one of them is Carolee Schneemann.³ Do you know her work?

Alanis: No.

Alex: She recently passed away.

Alanis: How old was she?

Alex: In her eighties. Over decades of work, she experimented with film form to represent women's sexuality from a female perspective. And she said to me, she didn't think of what she had had as a career. And it's interesting that you said this to me, too. For her, and other important women filmmakers who I've interviewed, they have felt that there were obstacles in the film

² *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Media* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

³ "The MS. Q&A: Feminist Carolee Schneemann Looks Backwards and Forward," *MS. Blog*, January 29, 2018: <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2018/01/29/ms-qa-feminist-artist-carolee-schneemann-looks-backward-forward>.

world for them to have everything that they were capable of: a career and other things. She wasn't supported really until quite late in her life. How do you think about that in relationship to your career as an Indigenous woman filmmaker in Canada?

Alanis: Well, as a filmmaker at first this was very difficult. The Film Board didn't give me anything. I had to go raise money first and I found that very humiliating. And it was never enough because we were shooting 16mm and it's expensive. And so that part was difficult. When I made *Amisk*, I had very little money.

Alex: My favorite! I wrote about it for your catalogue, *Alanis Obomsawin: Lifework*.⁴

Alanis: That is why I am speaking about it with you. I am very attached to that film, too. I had to find money to pay the airfares of the scores of Indigenous artists who came to Montreal, and they would sing or perform for free. It's poverty, from A to Z, of course. And everybody said, yes. I had a lot of people that I invited to come from all over Canada. And I was so glad. But a couple of weeks before, I said to them, "sorry, there's no money." I had invited all these people. I was so discouraged. And then I said, "well, I'm going to have to raise some money." So, I went to speak to a group of Hydro Quebec, who were responsible for the dam. And I went to do a lecture for \$2,000. I said, "I'm going to do this. I don't care who I like." So, I managed to raise all the money for the airfare but because of having so little money even so, I couldn't put people in a hotel. I put them in the YMCA and even those who were married couples were not allowed to sleep together. And I had about 40 people to dinner at my house every night. And I was cooking. People, my friends, were coming and I would leave the keys on the steps. I had a gas stove at that time. And I remember after everybody was gone, my bill for gas was \$1,100. It took me months and months to pay that. It was worth it, every second.

Alex: Do you feel like your career has been properly supported?

Alanis: Well, certainly since, *Incident at Restigouch*, in 1984. My life changed there because I was in so many fights, but the film board gave me real support.

Alex: That's quite unique.

Alanis: Before that, they supported me from afar.

Alex: That is an important lesson to learn from your career. Because having NFB support has really enabled you to extend your thinking and your voice to the places that you want to go, which is harder for other filmmakers. Another lesson that I wanted to think about with you is mentoring. How do you support and think about the mentoring of other Indigenous artists, filmmakers, and women?

Alanis: I am almost constantly mentoring somebody.

⁴ "The Gift of Time: Listening in *Amisk*," in *Alanis Obomsawin: Lifework*, eds. Richard William Hill and Hila Peleg (Munich: HKW, Prestel, 2022): 62-83.

Alex: Did you have a mentor?

Alanis: No. No. I didn't know anything about film. When I was in school as a young girl in a French school in Three Rivers, when I was like 10, 12 years old, I heard the children in French saying "we went to the movies." But in France you say *le cinema* or *vue*, like, "see," or "you're seeing something." And when I heard that, I thought it was a country they were talking about, a place they went that was moving. But I didn't know what moving meant.

And I remember going back home to my community. And I asked this old man that I really love. I said, "did you ever go there, to Vue?" And he didn't answer me. And, he says, "let's lie down here outside. Let's look up at the sky." And it was full of clouds. So, he says to me, "what do you see?" So, I start telling him, "I'm seeing pink, *rouge*. And this one is walking this way." And he never said anything, but it was only later on that I realized he was telling me, "this is the movies."

Alex: I have several times interviewed a lesbian filmmaker, a very famous artist named Barbara Hammer.⁵ And she recently passed away in her eighties, as did Agnes Varda, who I also spoke to at a pinnacle of her career.⁶ Barbara spent her early career looking for the women in film before her, and the lesbians. Finding very few, she then attempted to model that for others. So, because you couldn't find mentors yourself ...

Alanis: I didn't know where. I didn't look for it.

Alex: So, where did you find the way to move forward?

Alanis: I never found anything. I was singing in those days. I was touring in prisons, schools. And I was very busy doing that and fighting through that. And I got myself in so many fights, for the same reason, for children. I didn't like the educational system and I criticized them. And, I was very outspoken about what they were teaching about us, disgusted.

There are people from where I come from, most of the men were guides in the Bush for hunting and fishing. And in the province of Quebec at that time, many lakes were privately owned. And there was a lake that was owned by a group of people, and you had to be a member to go there. And all those people who were members were rich people; they have to pay a fee. It was not for poor people. I decided to write a letter to all the members. Before that I put a note in the paper saying that I'm doing a campaign to get a pool for children in my community, and I'm looking for someone who would do secretarial work for free. And this woman answered, she was from New Zealand, and she says, "I'm working for you." She was a nurse, but she says, "I'll come and help you one day a week. And I'll do all your correspondence in English." And so, I said to her, "I want to write a letter to all these members." And so, she did it for me and two people

⁵ "In Conversation: Barbara Hammer with Alexandra Juhasz," *Brooklyn Rail*, December 2017: brooklynrail.org/2017/12/film/IN-CONVERSATION-BARBARA-HAMMER-with-Alexandra-Juhasz

⁶ "The Words and Worlds of Carolee Schneemann and Barbara Hammer with Two Thoughts by Agnes Varda," *Another Gaze: A feminist film journal* 3 (July 2019): 24-30.

answered and that's it. And one person sent me \$10, the other one \$25. And I'm looking at this and I was so insulted. And I said, "well, I think all the stories from my father and other men, they call these men they work with gentleman." There was, I thought, a lot of affection from those guys too, for our community. But now they don't even bother to answer me. So, one day I said, I'm going to the club and I had never been there. They had this big, beautiful dining room, a kind of a hotel room with a fireplace. That's really lovely. So, I go to the dining room and I see one table, perhaps there's six or eight people sitting together and I see another table, just one guy sitting alone, that's it? Nobody else. I go to the table where there's this man alone eating. In Quebec, at that time, the hydroelectricity was owned by a family, not by the government. And this man who was sitting there was the owner. There you go. His name was Mr. Dumas, but I didn't know at the time. So, I go and I'm standing. He said, "I just heard you, you were talking about Teo." His guide who was my mother's cousin, an older man who taught me songs and all sorts of things. He said, "He guided me many times. And, one time I gave him a \$25 tip. What did he do? On his way home, he stopped in a Tavern and buys beer for everybody."

And I'm standing there. I said, "Mr. Dumas, you may have the power to be able to give a present of money but you do not have the power over this money." That's right. I said, "it doesn't matter that he bought a drink for everybody." I said, "He's very generous. And he just wants to pay a treat for others. If he wants to, he can start a fire with the \$25 and there's nothing you can do about it." And he was so disgusted with me because I talked to him like that. I said, "never mind." I said, "You send us \$25. Thank you." But it worked. And eventually money arrived and we built a swimming pool for people in my community. And it's still there. This is more than 40 years ago. And that band always took very good care of it. If there's something wrong, they repair it. And a couple of years ago, the people from the town went to the band office and asked if their kids can come to swim there now because they don't have a swimming pool any more, and we said, "Of course."

Alex: As I told you, I want to end with shoes. But let's get there through gifts. A lot of your work is about generosity. In your story, we learn about the gifts of labor, and drink, and a pool, and the stinginess of some awful men. The generosity of your relative. I have heard you speak about how giving money, having money, those are not gifts that value life. You can only live on air, and water, and other human beings. These are gifts. I write about learning from you about the gift of time in your films, giving your people time so that you and we can hear them. So that they can hear themselves.

So, I'll tell you a story. When I was interviewing Carolee Schneemann at her home, she had a bag of shoes in the back of her car. We were driving to lunch and she couldn't wear these beautiful shoes anymore because she had an ailment in her leg. She told me, "I'm gonna give these away at a thrift store, but your feet look big like mine, like you have the same size feet as me!" I asked, "what size are your shoes?" She said, "oh, I'm an eight and a half." "Oh, an eight and a half! Me too." "Would you like to go through my bag of shoes?" So, I did, after lunch, and I chose three pairs of shoes and I took them home with me from this mentor, from someone who I respected so much, who I spent time with over the years and whose films I know and teach and learn from. And since she has passed, I wear her shoes all the time. And when I walk in her shoes, I know that she's with me. And I remember her and I honor her and her shoes are very important to me. What a gift! So, Alanis, what's a gift you like to give? And what's a gift you'd like to receive?



Alanis: Well, I have a lot of clothes that I love. I never throw away my clothes. I wear stuff that I've had for many years. My body is pretty much the same in terms of size. But lately, I've been saying I've got too much clothes. So, I put a lot of clothes in bags. Some of them I never wore before. And I take it to the home of a friend. She has young daughters and they have fun. Sometimes I get their pictures with those clothes. I have a lot of shoes also. Cause I love shoes.

Alex: I love shoes too.

Alanis: Mine are very small feet.

Alex: Little feet. Mine are larger. My shoes today are a gift from my friend Claudia. She gave these to me because they hurt her feet and she thought I'd like them. So red.

Alanis: A wonderful color.

Alex: Claudia Rankine, a beautiful African-American poet. But, tell me, is there a gift you'd like to receive?

Alanis: A gift that I'd like to receive? I don't know if I think of such a thing. But I think the best gift I can receive is when I hear respect from my own people. I get very upset when our people are put down or not respected. And like here in Berlin, I just feel so good for all the people that are in these documentaries and what it means when they find out that they're here. And that's so wonderful because they're going to be known as the beautiful people as they are.

Alex: Well, I hope you have received that gift many times over. Yes. I know you have.

Alanis: Oh my.

Alex: So, you are a lucky woman, a rich woman.

Alanis: Yes.

