



## CONVERSATIONS

# The Way We Look: Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi

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by Silvia Lucchesi

Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi are a couple of wonderful artists and filmmakers who have given us over forty years of poetic, serious cinema. Both were born in 1942, he was trained as an architect in Venice, she as a painter in Salzburg. Their work, which began in the 1970s, represents one of the most coherent and significant journeys in the international world of experimental cinema. In their numerous films, often created using tools of their own invention, such as the "analytic camera," they unearthed images condemned to oblivion in forgotten archives whose memory provides an instrument for reading the present. They have received countless recognition and participated in major international film festivals including Venice, Cannes, and Locarno. They have also been the topic of many retrospectives at museums around the world such as Mart (2008), MoMA (2009), Hangar Bicocca (2012), and The Pompidou Centre (2015). In 2015 they presented at the Armenian Pavilion at the Venice Biennial. A few days before *Lo schermo dell'arte 2016* (<http://www.schermomodellarte.org/>), I met them in their home in

Milan. Talking to them is like traveling through time, their conversation is rich with memories, names, places and stories. I have just come back from Paris where The Pompidou Centre presented their new project *A propos de nos voyages en Russie*. It is November 9<sup>th</sup>, victory day for Donald Trump as the president-elect of the United States.

ANGELA RICCI LUCCHI: Yervant says that today is a historic date, today the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States has been elected.

YERVANT GIANIKIAN: A crazy character, not even his own party wanted him. America is so complex. If I were American, I wouldn't have voted, I would have abstained. We are in a very dangerous period, with NATO at the edges of Eastern Europe, with war in Syria and Iraq. The Americans have made a disastrous politics and our poor Europe has disappeared. The worst thing about this election is that it will make the right even bigger, it will change politics in Germany, France and even here.

ARL: This morning at four o'clock I turned on the television and I saw that Trump, he was getting ahead. And I said: I hope we can stop thinking about the stock market and economics and begin to think about human beings. I know that this is a utopian notion.



SILVIA LUCCHESI : It seems interesting to me to take this as a point of departure in talking about the themes in your work. You know the United States well since you've been there many times over the year, with underground and more mainstream, accepted artists.

YG: You're never accepted, the exams keep coming. Yes, it's true, we know the United States. We started working in the 1970s but at that time Italy was confining, you couldn't do much here. That's why we went to America and between 1975 and 1980 we filmed a lot of our footage with our "film profumati" (scented films) which were 8mm and some 16mm. We were invited to Anthology in New York, to MoMA and then to San Francisco, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, El Paso, Philadelphia and other smaller cities. We saw a racist America. In Texas I couldn't go into certain restaurants because of my moustache, I looked like a Mexican. And then in June 1979 in London there was a big avant-garde festival, the Third International Avant-Garde Film Festival, and that's where our work was discovered.

SL: Your work is based on the intersection between past and present, a kind of suspension through which our own times can be set on fire, our very reality. What is contemporary for you?

YG: We were just thinking about that right before you arrived. A few years ago we did an interview with the magazine *Fata Morgana* for an issue in on the archive ("Archivio", n. 2, 2007, 18-19). In the magazine we wrote a phrase we'd like to read now: "We are not archeologists, entomologists, anthropologists, as we are often defined. For us the past does not exist, nostalgia doesn't exist but the present does exist. We don't use the archive in itself, we use what is already made, in the vein of Duchamp, to speak of today, of ourselves, of the horrors that surround us. The artist's work is to fight against the violence that engulfs us from East and West. Since the very beginning our work has been against violence to the environment, to animals, against the violence man inflicts upon man. In *Dal Polo all'Equatore* [From the Pole to the Equator] the first apparition of man in the white desert is with a rifle, his first action is to kill a bear." This is our contemporary.

SL: This statement seems fundamental for understanding your work.

YG: Our method of work, the analytic camera, our hands, our lenses, the film that manually runs: in all of the archive materials we use for our films we see the present, because everything that is happening today is a repetition of what has already come to pass.

SL: The manipulations that you make on film, for example the alterations of speed with the use of slow motion, or the coloring of black and white, are they choices that you use to move the concentration of the gaze to the materials being used, a declaration of the assumption of responsibility?

YG: Yes, they are a repetition of the way we look, what we see. We film the parts that are at risk of being overlooked. Or because they are vanishing because of the chemical composition of the film or because they are too fast and can't be seen in projection. In fact, our method isn't so much about reassembling but rather, re-filming. Shooting is the point of departure. We always use the example of the soldier who dies falling at a subliminal speed, it is made up of two-three photograms that you can't see. But also of the glances turned to the camera that last only a second. And we make them last longer because these looks that we watch also watch us.

SL: When was the moment that you began to imagine that your research could become not only films to project but also installations?

YG: The first time was for the big show *Le Desert* at the Fondation Cartier in 2000 in which we exhibited *Visioni del deserto*. Then we made the project *Marcia dell'uomo* for the Szeeman Biennial in 2001, a work that was then shown in Lisbon as well as at Hangar Bicocca. The show at Hangar Bicocca was very important for us, it was seen by a lot of people, not just Italians, also many foreigners, they even came from MoMA and saw the installations for the first time.

SL: In Florence we will present seven films. Some of them are outside of your work with the analytic camera, such as the documentary on Mario Giacomelli and the very short piece with Walter Chiari.

YG: In 1994 Robert Delpire, director of the Centre Nationale de la Photographie, asked us to make a short film about Giacomelli for "Contacts," the famous television series about great photographers contact sheets produced by ARTE. We knew Giacomelli's work but we'd never met him. We went to Senigaglia with a sound engineer and right away he told us that he never made contact sheets. So we then decided to construct the film starting with his negatives, using them in the same way we used them for our own films, and we made the contact sheets. He made enlargements from the negatives and then he cut them in small pieces and wrote on them, that's the material we filmed. He used a very old 6x9 camera, actually he had two, he kept an extra in the car in case one broke. He worked with expired film and with a flash that fixed the faces, especially in the *Ospizio* series, which we show various images from in the film.

SL: The video with Walter Chiari is very intense, especially for those who knew him only through television or theater. With the close ups of his face, even briefly— they last only 5 minutes— you were able to capture his humanity.

YG: We were friends. He was like that, when he was with company he was a bigger actor than in the theater. When we gathered his words he was already sick, it is a confession about the operation he was to have the next day. In 1987, a year before this video filmed in Milan, we made a trip to Armenia together and we kept a diary. We'd also like to work with that.

SL: In the program for *Focus dello Schermo dell'arte* there is your *Notes sur nos voyages en Russie*. Recently in Paris you presented *A propos de nos voyages en Russie*, a second stop, more structured, that is prelude to a future feature length work. In *Notes* you don't use images from the past but watercolors Angela has made to tell of the past. The impressions of meeting a generation of intellectuals and artists from the 1930s are entrusted to your off-screen voice. When did you record the conversations with these remarkable forgotten characters, often unknown to us in the West, did you already know that you would do this work?

YG: We went to Russia in 1989 and we met with and filmed these people. But after the fall of the Soviet Union there was no interest in returning to these stories. We didn't find any resources to continue this work, it was necessary to translate the conversations for example. In 2008 we decided to pay for the hours and hours of Russian translation ourselves. And from there our desire to draw those stories came about, also because Angela, who has always kept a daily diary, had notes from the meetings as well as drawings she'd made at the time. *Notes* is the first work we made about this Russian research and we finished it between 2010 and 2011. In the end we found a producer, the feature length work is still being made.

SL: The future film will be constructed like these *Notes*?

YG: We think we will alter Angela's drawn and painted notes into filmed images.

ARL: Not long ago, I said to Yervant: "All of this work we've been doing for so long about Russia, maybe in this Russia-phobic climate is putting forth a less atrocious message, less aggressive..." and then maybe messages from artists count for nothing but we try to change something.

SL: Angela, with *Notes*, about your journeys in Russia we introduced your work as draftsman and painter, something that has always been with you.

ARL: For years I have kept a daily diary, and little by little as I write or read something I naturally start to sketch and those transform into watercolors. I've always done it, since childhood. When I decided to go to study with Kokoschka in Salzburg in the late 1970s— he was still energetic and on top of things— it was because I sought out the best master who could teach me watercolor technique. He held summer courses that I attended for two years. But it wasn't only a watercolor school, a technique I didn't know and that proved quite difficult, it was also a lesson in culture because all around him were great philosophers, intellectuals and writers from Central Europe. For me, coming from a small provincial city it was a magnificent experience.

SL: Watercolors are a way of stopping time?

ARL: Yes, of fixing time. Now that we're working on the Russians for the third time, I realize that there is important material because sometimes capturing something in drawing or watercolors brings out stronger characteristics in a face than in photography. As soon as I look at one of the images the memory is immediate, more potent than a photograph.

SL: This work is an intimate necessity for you, it is not only instrumental as work for the next film.

ARL: I made these designs for us, for me, they weren't made with the prospect of being seen or filmed. For the first time the pages from these notebooks, everyday stories, trips, notes, the genesis of the films will be published in a book coming out with Humbolt Books. At first we were apprehensive about showing these materials because it seemed a bit strange to us that someone would care about such intimate things.

SL: You showed your watercolors for the first time at Hangar Bicocca, then at the Venice Biennial in 2015 and then at the Pompidou Centre last year. They were on long rolls.

ARL: I normally made water colors in my albums, for example I made all of Marinetti's *Zang Tumb Tumb* which was an insane undertaking, like I said, I did them for me. Then I set out to make the big Armenian roll that's seventeen meters long that was shown at Hangar Bicocca, and that was then also shown at the *Isola degli Armeni*. I also made that for us, for me, I didn't think about showing it. The last roll that in fact we call the Russian Roll because it will be part of our future film. And yesterday I began a new roll, I decided to begin a new undertaking, this is about our life, it is even more intimate.

Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi are two visual artists who, with cinema as their starting point, embark on an all-round reflection on the way images are used and on their intrinsic ambivalence.

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