

7. Abramović 2003.
8. Abramović quoted in Sileo and Viola 2012, p. 28.
9. For instance, in an interview with the critic Hans Ulrich Obrist she says, recalling Marcel Duchamp: '[T]he public has to be as creative as the artist. So we have to educate the public of the 21st century to think that this is possible. The "performance-score" opens possibilities for the public to be active and not just a voyeur of somebody else's experience.' (Obrist 1998, p. 42)

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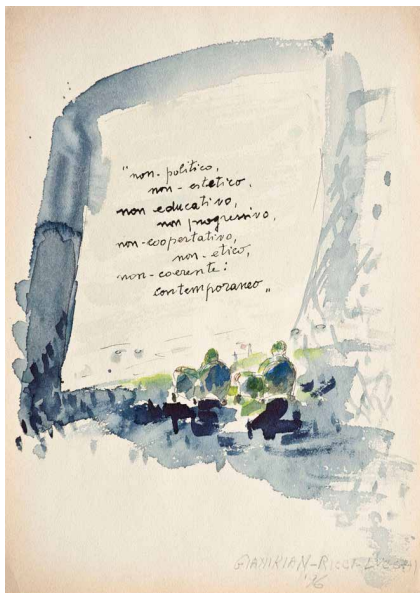
'Non Non Non'

Visiting the exhibition with Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi

Miriam De Rosa

Non-political, non-aesthetic, non-educational, non-progressive, non-cooperative, non-ethical, non-coherent: contemporary. It is after this list of negations that Hangar Bicocca in Milan decided to name *Non Non Non*, the first Italian retrospective dedicated to Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi's installations. Taken from a watercolour by the artists and placed at the entrance of the exhibition space, this formula apparently collides with the engaged, historical themes featuring the works selected by curator Andrea Lissoni with Chiara Bertola, but it perfectly

synthesises the authors' philosophy. This is what immediately emerges upon meeting them: '[w]e are interested in the present', Yervant Gianikian says. 'Our films and installations deal with those stories that defined our present as it is.' Therefore, hard work on ancient archival reels transforms these materials into images, which acquire a new contemporary substance.



*Fig. 1 Non Non Non, watercolour
Courtesy of the artists*

The exhibition is organised in three main spaces: a temporary pavilion opening the visit, a long central nave starting from the pavilion exit and leading to a big square room at the end of the itinerary, and the cube. As Ricci Lucchi explains:

[w]e collaborated on the space design, in conceiving how to exhibit our works. It has been challenging since we didn't know the exhibition space, which we found at first quite disquieting: a black frightening abyss, especially the cube. We studied how to plan the whole and to connect the different parts, because the long nave seemed to us quite distracting. So we decided to exploit the cube as much as we could. Just for this reason we privileged our installation works, which we believe fit perfectly with the space and, at the same time, represent the less-known part of our artistic research. I was the one plotting the room, selecting the sequences to be shown there, and working on the rhythm of the images. This last aspect is crucial, because when each screen shows a different excerpt the squared space seems to contain a full humanity moving frantically and restlessly.'

As a matter of fact, Hangar Biccocca is notable for being a very particular gallery. Nestled within the converted Ansaldo-Breda industrial plant, it represents a symptomatic example of the renovation policy which concerned many post-industrial locations, turning them into a space for the promotion of contemporary visual and performance arts. The extraordinary attention to site-specific projects (as Kiefer's *Seven Heavenly Palaces* testifies) is able to enhance the peculiarities of the exhibition space. This same attention is expressed by a linear itinerary as well, where the wideness and the darkness of the gallery are broken by the light coming from the screens and filtering from inside the pavilion. The latter is divided into two sections: the first area gathers a selection of watercolours from the 1970s until now; the second room, with a more lateral entrance, is structured as a smaller space dominated by the presence of a unique screen showing the single-channel video installation *Carrousel de Jeux* (2005).

As far as the watercolours are concerned, they can appear to the average visitor as an appendix to the filmic production by Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi, since they entail many of the scenes presented onscreen. However, a closer observation highlights a more structural continuity connecting them to the films. They do not simply work as something supplementary, focusing certain aspects of a wider representational effort which is more often expressed through a cinematic language. They are rather a true counterpart – artworks living an autonomous life, able to guide the moving image, to explain and organise it. The most vivid definition of the watercolours comes from Gianikian:

Angela masters a sort of lightness, which she learned from Oskar Kokoschka, and she has an amazing visual memory. She is able to recreate people's faces without seeing them while drawing. It is a precious talent. She is like a camera – by means of drawing she writes the journal of life.

The selection encompasses true rarities, such as a painted 17 metre-long roll – a work that has been constructed through the years and which details Armenian fables that Gianikian's father liked to tell. The artists recorded the old man, and the watercolours perform the same operation in visual terms.

In the frame of the same complex artistic research, the role of watercolours is indeed parallel to that of film images. As Gianikian points out,

[s]ometimes the drawings are even useful while releasing the films, because they work as diagrams summarising 'functions', that is to say they present *motifs* and peculiar elements recurring in the films themselves. For example, in *Dal polo all'equatore* there are a number of 'functions', such as marches,



Fig. 2 *Watercolours roll*
Courtesy of Hangar Bicocca

hunts, weapons, wars, or religious processions, which have all been drawn. Therefore, the sections of the film come up again and again, producing a gigantic sea of images, in which it was actually easy for us to get lost. These illustrations and diagrams helped us in finding our way in this visual universe.

The watercolours are thus conceived as a metaphor of the contamination among visual languages. They exemplify a composite, multifaceted commitment and entail the essence of the image, which is fixed on the paper surface and reworked in its moving version. Also, they represent the possibility of a watery, dissolving material to become a writing method – not only fixing stories thanks to a potentially endless palette of colours, but also being filmed and entering the filmic writing, as happens in *Notes sur nos voyage en Russie 1989-1990* (a film released in 2010, unfortunately absent at the exhibition).

The idea of working on the consistency of images is something evident in the realm of watercolour technique; also, it is an essential concept in the elaboration of the filmic image, as the process developed by Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi implies. In this sense, the multiple projections shown in the nave and the cube are emblematic. *La marcia dell'uomo* (2001), a three-screen installation set in the nave, situates different moments of human history in relation to each other. The first screen excerpts two seconds of Étienne-Jules Marey's *Hommes nègres* (1895), showing the experiments on men from Senegal crossing the screen space; the

second screen displays an ethnographic piece released around 1910, dealing with the imposition of Western habits, social practices, and cultural conventions on African people; the third screen presents an excerpt taken from a home movie from the 1960s, where a white man poses between two topless African girls wearing traditional costumes, afterwards paying them for having taken part as 'folkloristic presences' in his portrait.



*Fig. 3 La marcia dell'uomo (2001), three video projections, 35 mm, 4'30", sound, music Keith Ulrich
Courtesy of Hangar Bicocca*

The path is organised along a line illustrating the way in which men become aware of the image and its power and usage – the 'march of men' into the domain of the visual. Such an evolution tells the story of the appropriation of the scope regime. In the beginning, the use of photographic and moving images represented a pioneering field, characterised by constant experimentation; later, a more mature awareness about the potentiality of visual techniques and arts turned it into a proper research and exploration tool. In more recent times, such a potentiality subverted the 'positivistic' use of the image, framing vision and the practices connected to the image in a context of overexploited visibility, where the filmic frame becomes one of a wider range of caption strategies.

At the same time, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi tell the story of modern colonialism, the chronicle of men conquering men and 'studying the other as an insect' (as the caption at the end of the sequence points out). The delicate gaze of the artists emphasises precisely this itinerary, while the distance among the screens mirrors the temporal distance among the historical moments depicted by the installation.

Such a distance is chromatically underscored by the intense tones characterising the images on the three screens. The peculiar attention towards colours is just one of the elements on which the attention of the couple is centred. In fact, the particular procedure they use in order to rework the archival images manipulates them in a sort of scientific way. The 'analytical camera' – a special device built by the artists themselves, assembling a scrolling tool and an air chamber² – enables them to re-film the frames, operating on them, enlarging the image, and literally entering it.³ Thanks to this process the duration of the images is extended, as the frames are re-filmed in order to explore them in detail, notice their peculiarities, perceive their consistency, and detect their substance and thicken their grain. As in a quest for the tangibility of a visual trace, the eye embraces the image and crystallises it, discovering the intangible and the invisible.

Our 'analytical camera' permits us to work on the physicality of the image. Sometimes we are interested in the signs left on the reel by collectors and operators, such as the burns due to the stop of the film before the incandescent bulb. The mark of men catches our attention, but also that of time does. The sign of consumption, deterioration, and chemical decomposition of nitrate strikes us. Moreover, the concept of materiality couples with the impression of having to do with 'lived' images. They suggest the idea of a consumption of the visual element triggered by those gazes which saw them – mostly private gazes, since the spectator was quite often the one projecting these very images, even touching the film and leaving his fingerprints on it.

What the 'analytical camera' explores is thus the folds of a multi-layered writing, which is not simply the filmic one released by the author of the shooting but a heterogeneous ensemble of human and historical traces. In this sense, the device created by Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi becomes a tool able to elaborate the cinematic image in its grain, texture, and materiality. Moreover, the 'analytic camera' is a copying technique to enhance the image in its history and life: 'we are like copyists, replicating cinema to avoid its dissolution', clarifies Gianikian. Such an action is expressed by a further reworking, namely the recoloring phase that consists of a superimposition of a coloured layer on the image, aiming to add a particular meaning, impression, and effect to the representation. It is a profoundly symbolic operation, which contributes to a renewal of the archival image.

The authors choose shocking and eye-catching colours for their frames, which characterise both the works exposed throughout the nave and those in the cube. It is probably inside the latter that the elaboration of images achieves its most expressive power. After having covered the long nave, a wide space leaves the

visitor a certain freedom to move throughout the dark openness of the ex-industrial plant, when the trajectory stops in the cube.



Fig. 4 The 'cube' hosting five multiple projections: Frammenti elettrici (2002-2004), four video projections, 8mm – 16mm, 13', sound; Vision du désert (2000), single video projection, 18', sound, music by Keith Ullrich; Trittico del Novecento (2002-2008), five video projections, 5', sil; Terrae Nullius (2002), single video projection, 35mm, 13', sound; Topografie (2007), single video projection, 10', sil
 Courtesy of Hangar Bicocca

This is a huge room, where the installations basically fill the three faces of the cube visible from the entrance point. The extremely high ceiling, the straight lines, and the neutral grey tones of the concrete floor and walls produce the effect of being inside a gigantic box. The sense of openness characterising the nave is replaced here by a sort of intimacy, as if this space could absorb the public. The large size of the screens and the aesthetic, emotive impact of the images remarkably contribute to enhance these impressions.

The colouring process demonstrates a relevant value in figural terms: the authors' work in preserving and manipulating the image echoes the opacity of what it brings back to life. The chromatic tones reflect and express the perception of the subjects appearing on the screen in the very moment they were filmed. The sequences presenting war scenes are apropos in this sense. As the artists comment,

[a]s in *Su tutte le vette è pace*, the structure of the film follows the visions by Austrian soldier Felix Hecht, who used to note them in his diary. He was a young pacifist stuck into the violence of the war and forced to spend four years on the Adamello mountains to fight. During this period his perception abilities were deformed, since the colours he saw derived from his hopeless impressions and his expositions to the extreme life conditions on the glacier. In his diary he describes the sky as yellow and the snow as red. His vision merged sky and snow, testifying to his desperation for a lost war.

The choice of colouring the natural elements after Hecht's memories reinterprets the reality of the image in light of the horrible transformation of man's faculties and his dehumanisation. The nebulosity and the apparently fictional colours render a violent tension, which is turned into a strong visualisation and a provoking exhibition of the image. According to Ricci Lucchi, this use of colour is 'aesthetic, evoking an emotional sense of what is on screen. This makes the same use of colour ethic[al]' – the blinding yellow of the sky denounces the suffering and the barbarities of the war, showing the conflict through its negative image. Such an elaboration of the frame requires a long treatment of the film, which is supported by the 'analytical camera'-work, as it enables one to get closer and closer to the image, to enlarge it by giving the viewer a chance to know every millimetre of every single frame. As Gianikian observes,

[e]very single frame as an entity in itself has its own specific time. Keeping this in mind, we release a new reading of the archival material, we make it up-to-date, for we re-examine and disaggregate it, in order to catch the very detail able to disclose the meaning of images. We re-signify the images. It is like touching with your hands for the first time something that had been hidden for a long time. We trigger a reappraisal of the manual film scrolling through the 'analytical camera', and this highlights aspects which are invisible during the normal projection, so that we can recognise the signs and get the deep meaning of the image.

Therefore, the artists work on the verge between visibility and invisibility, physicality and insubstantiality – ultimately, their cinema moves between tangibility and intangibility. These dichotomies characterise their technique but also seem to be recurrent at a representational level as well. Many of the sequences presented in the cube offer a representation of the human body and of the environment that engender a reproductive effect addressing the materiality of nature and man. This very materiality appears by means of an assemblage made up of doubled frames,

or frames with speed that has been slowed down. Such a technique enables us to include onscreen what is generally left off – a peculiarity of the artists' cinema.

In a recent intervention, Gianikian stated that 'the soldiers who took part in the First World War died in two-frames time'. If this is true, then the 'analytical camera' shows the specific engagement of the authors with repressed contents, since what is often excluded by the representation choices becomes here the beating heart of their work. In other words, what nowadays does not respond to fictional and filmic economies is endowed by Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi with a new figurality and a new cinematic consistency. The spectator is presented the interstitial as a site of renewed tangibility of reality, even when it does show brutality and violence. An excerpt from *Frammenti Elettrici* shown on the central screen of the cube seems to interpret such a logic in a very radical way: a woman undergoes a terrifying surgical operation on her head, which is filmed step-by-step. The medical methods and the tools used by the doctors are old and inadequate, with the result of an inhuman, cruel scene developing for the viewer. The effect on the public is a reduction of motion in the room space, a catatonic gaze, and a mystical silence.



Fig. 5 *Watercolour for Oh! Uomo*
Courtesy of the artists

In the same room of the exhibition, some sequences devoted to the veterans' body and its fictitious reconstruction are shown.

This is an idea we tried to focus in *Oh! Uomo* as well. We wanted to underline the very materiality of metal and wood, because these elements were those which caused terrible mutilations during the war. They were responsible for the laceration of human flesh and the smashing of human bones, but at the same time, immediately after the conflict, they were used to produce prosthetics with the aim of recomposing dispersed, disfigured bodies.

The gaze of disabled ex-servicemen seems absent, as if it had been stopped on the battlefield. As Ricci Lucchi says,

it expresses to us the feeling of having been used as living 'surgical experiments'. Their eyes reveal fear and shyness in exposing themselves and their deformed body, but there's also the hope to be accepted. Courage and challenge. We read some diaries belonging to these soldiers and in one of them we found the soldier's terror to meet his mother and his wife. So what we attempt to do is to make this terrible pain and deep grief come to the surface of the image. To us these men do not represent monsters who can be used in the films to produce a big special effect: they embody the post-war instance, just because they are what remained after the war itself.

These arguments legitimate the long, terrible catalogue of bodily mutations we are presented with: faceless men, unrecognisable people, blind and lame veterans fighting against their deprivations. As Ricci Lucchi explains, these images are coupled with a sequence showing the production of prosthetics. Here, the materiality of the human body is replaced by an artificial one – as an attempt to fill the void of a substance which is irrecoverably lost, this effort is destined to end up tragically, because the objects conceived to fulfil the physiological, medical necessities of these lacerated men do not work. The intangibility of the emptiness left on their bodies by the war injuries cannot be sublimated and thus turned into something functional, material, physical, and therefore tangible.

In the excerpts shown inside the cube, the defacing of man is parallel to another kind of vandalism: namely, the ravage of nature both during the war and the colonialist period. In fact, many sequences bring forth the destruction of natural environments, such as the razing of mountains or wild animal hunts. Even in these cases, the use of natural materials such as metal and wood perpetrates a torture of landscape and nature itself. As Gianikian states:

our work aims to show the real face of violence. This is why we reflect upon images, analyse them, make them dialogue among themselves, interact, and even collide; we try to build the conditions enabling images to produce 'electric shocks' – a fact that explains the title of *Frammenti Elettrici*. Such an effect implies a particular attitude of the public, who is requested to interpret and elaborate the images; it is a difficult work, which exposes the spectator to strong, violent representations, as it precisely happens in the cube, where he can suddenly find himself in a nightmare.⁴

Another kind of violence (apparently camouflaged as a collection of gentle, almost funny objects) is visually expressed by *Carrousel de Jeux*. This installation is set in the smaller room of the temporary pavilion, which opens and also somehow ends the exhibition. The spectator is presented a collection of old toys that are systematically approached by the hands of Gianikian, who studies them under the eye of the camera. Following such an exploration, we rapidly realise that the presumed ludicity dissolves in a deep sense of anguish.



Fig. 6 Carrousel de Jeux (2005), single video, Hi8, 43', sound
Courtesy of the artists

Carrousel is like a journey in the past of a faraway childhood. By means of it we travel in time going back to the period between the First and Second World Wars. These toys belonged to children that are not with us anymore. The objects reflect this, since they are deteriorated too. Those who were children at that time have been overwhelmed by tragic events and their toys are still here, as speechless witnesses, crumbled pieces of memory. The touching hand presents, unveils, shows these objects, which become the subjects of the film. We risk getting lost among them, analysing one after the other; what is able to stop us is just the fascist gesture of a piece that arrests this uncanny catalogue, as if the Roman salute was an order.

Gianikian's words suggest the deep empathic suffering in literally getting in touch with these relics of a lost childhood. Therefore, the impression we get is that the artists question the objects in their substance: the camera follows an approaching movement, which takes the observer closer and closer to the toys; to their details, material composition, and texture. The representation stands in for a way of access to an ancient world, whose memories are here fetishised in an attempt to discover the life, the stories, and the History emanating from the collection. Both the possession of the objects (which now belong to the artists) and the perceptive, emotive experience they grant extend the opportunity to acquire the tradition they embody, the folkloric power and the imagery they are imbued in. Thanks to this filmic *wunderkammer*, Angela Ricci Lucchi and Yervant Gianikian create a precious and excruciating work of rare beauty, which represents the conclusive note of a similarly rich and perturbing exhibition.

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Notes

1. All extended quotes from an interview with the artists conducted by the author in 2012.
2. Gianikian & Ricci Lucchi 1995, 2004; Lissoni 2011.
3. Lumley 2011.
4. The Italian language enables Gianikian to play with the words, placing the idea of cube |cubo| and nightmare |in-cubo| side-by-side.

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