

W O M E N



CINEMA MAKERS

w o m e n

GALA MIRISSA
TATIANA ISTOMINA
SABINA ENGLAND
MARIA BELÉN ROBEDA
REBECCA HEIDENBERG
SUSANA LOPEZ
SARI NORMAN
SOPHIE BARTH
OIHANA VARELA
DANA VENEZIA

INDEPENDENT
WOMEN'S
CINEMA

A still from AGORAPHOBIA, a work by Gala Mirissa



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Gala Mirissa
AGORAPHOBIA

Tatiana Istomina

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“Philosophy of the Encounter: Hélène’s Story” is a puppet performance staged for video. It is based on the story of Helene Rytman, who was murdered by her husband, prominent French philosopher Louis Althusser, in 1980. Today Helene is largely forgotten; in death, as in life, she remains an insignificant woman lost in the shadow of her famous husband. Althusser, however, remains an influential thinker: his texts written before and after the murder are published, widely read and discussed. He is most well known for his theory of ideology formulated in the 1960s and the memoir describing the murder. The film attempts to reconstruct the story from Helene’s point of view and to explore its consequences for Althusser’s philosophy.

An interview by **Francis L. Quettier**
and **Dora S. Tennant**
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Hello Tatiana and welcome to *WomenCinematic*: we would like to invite our readers to visit <http://www.tatianaistomina.com> in order to get a wider idea about your artistic practice and we would start this interview with a couple of questions regarding your background. You have a solid background and after having earned your MFA in Fine

Arts from Parsons at The New School in New York, you had the chance to nurture your education at Salzburg Summer Art Academy. How did these experiences influence your evolution as an artist? Moreover, do you think that there is any central idea or interest that connects all the aspects of your artistic research?


Art making is not my first profession: before becoming an artist I worked as a research scientist and received a PhD in geophysics from Yale University. This background has shaped my personality and continues

to influence my artistic practice – not so much in its content, but in terms of methodology and general outlook. Science operates through abstractions, using theoretical concepts, principles and descriptions to help us understand how the natural world works. The intellectual apparatus of abstract thinking and representation is extremely powerful, but it also has major faults, and most of my projects explore both the potential and the limitations of abstraction in its different forms. For example, in some of my artworks I have explored how our view of history tends to rely on abstract, theoretical concepts and generalizations while disregarding the experiences of individuals. I have worked with archival documents, photographs and footage, reproducing, interpreting or altering them through painting, drawing and video, to question such sterile view of the past.

You are a versatile artist and your practice is multidisciplinary, ranging from painting and drawing to film and mixed media. Before discussing your artistic production, could you tell us what the multidisciplinary approach means for you? How do you select a medium in order to explore a particular theme?

Different mediums may be compared to different languages, or more precisely, different cultures, each with its own specific relationship to the world. Switching from one medium to another is like crossing national borders, and working with several mediums at once is similar to being continuously en route: familiar with most places, and not quite at home anywhere. It can be both liberating and uncomfortable; it makes you feel insecure, but gives you a





Philosophy of the Encounter
Hélène's Story

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sort of freedom.

In my practice the choice of the medium is often dictated by the sources I use. When I became interested in the history of the Yalta conference I looked at many archival photographs, documents and footage related to it. Thinking about how historic photographs shape our view of the past, I decided to reproduce and alter the images with ink and watercolor. And to highlight the bizarre, ambiguous character of archival footage, I recut it into a short film telling a fictional spy story that allegedly took place during the conference.

On some occasions my fascination with a particular medium and its problems becomes the motivation and the main subject of a project. For example, I have always been interested in abstract painting, its history and philosophy. In order to explore these issues from a new angle, I presented some of my paintings and drawings as if they were made by another artist – an obscure Russian-American painter Alissa Blumenthal, who lived in New York in the 1930-1980s. Over time the momentum of Blumenthal's narrative forced me to expand the project by creating ephemera – photographs, exhibition announcements, catalogues, etc. – that document the artist's life. These materials are usually displayed as installations alongside Blumenthal's artworks. The project is about abstract painting, but Blumenthal herself is an abstraction – a fictional character inspired by the biographies of thousands of New York artists who are forgotten today.

For this special edition of *WomenCinemakers* we have selected *Philosophy of the Encounter: Hélène's Story*, an extremely interesting work that our readers have already started to get to know in the introductory pages of this article and that can be viewed at







A still from **Philosophy of the Encounter: Helene's Story**

<https://vimeo.com/217342272>. **What has at once captured our attention of your insightful inquiry into the figure of H el ene Rytman is the way it provides the viewers with such an intense visual experience. When walking our readers through the genesis of your film, would you tell us how you developed the initial idea?**

I don't think many people today would recognize the name of H el ene Rytman, and those who do would only know it in connection with the name of her husband,

French philosopher Louis Althusser. Althusser developed his own particular brand of Marxism in the 1960s, and his ideas about the role of ideology in society remain influential today. H el ene's only claim to fame is her role as Althusser's wife and also his victim, killed by him in a fit of temporary insanity in 1980. After the murder Althusser was declared unfit to stand trial and stayed in a psychiatric hospital till 1983. Upon his release he continued writing, producing several philosophical essays and a memoir, *The Future Lasts Forever*, in which he described his and H el ene's lives, their relationship



A still from **Philosophy of the Encounter: Helene's Story**

and her death. Today Althusser remains a respected philosopher: his texts written before and after the murder continue to be published and read. H el ene, on the other hand, is completely forgotten: in death, as in life, she remains an insignificant woman lost in the shadow of her famous husband.

I became fascinated by this story because it conflates so many things: radical philosophy, politics, ideas about human freedom and agency, psychoanalysis, gender and power dynamics in a marriage, mental illness, etc.

But most of all I was interested in what remains concealed, inaccessible in Althusser's account of the events – that is the voice of H el ene herself, who is present in the story only through her absence. I couldn't help but wonder what would be her version of the narrative. It was nowhere to be found, so I had to make it up myself.

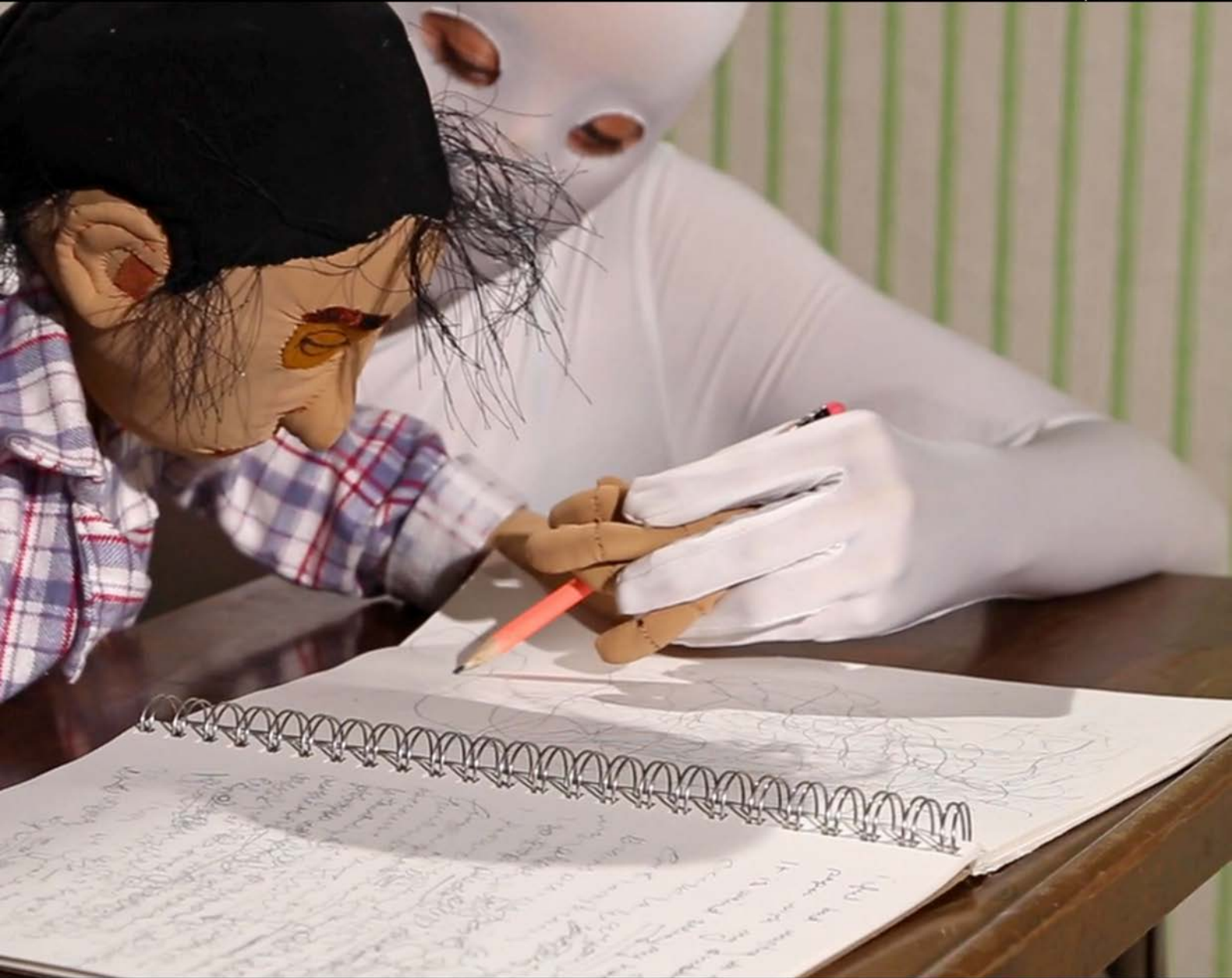
Philosophy of the Encounter: H el ene's Story features a combination of skillful cinematography and effective composition: what were your *aesthetic*

***decisions* when shooting? In particular, what was your choice of camera and lens?**

This has been my first attempt at making a film using an actual film set, lighting, actor and props. In my earlier projects I have either used found footage or filmed on the go with a hand-held camera or a smartphone. The idea to stage and film a puppet performance came up as a result of my collaboration with Canadian artist Mona Sharma, who works with fabric sculpture and digital drawing. When I invited her to join me in this project she took H el ene's story very much to heart and crafted a set of large dolls representing H el ene, Louis and a few supporting characters. They were absolutely amazing – very bizarre, humorous and somehow tragic. So the main task I put to myself was to bring these dolls to life, to figure out what they can do and what can be done to them, to see how they can communicate with the puppeteer, the viewer and each other. I didn't have a prepared script to begin with; the narrative was developed as we were filming, based on what was happening on the set. I was shooting with Canon 6D DSLR Camera with 24-105mm L-series lens. Each scene was designed as a different kind of interaction between the dolls and the puppeteer, with a specific emotional atmosphere emphasized by colored backdrops and lighting. Only during editing they were organized in a sort of ambiguous narrative.

In your film you leave the floor to your characters, finding an effective way to develop *an emotional bridge* with the viewers. What was the preparation with actors in terms of *rehearsal*? In particular, do you like







spontaneity or do you prefer to meticulously schedule every detail of your shooting process?

Spontaneity and chance are essential to me, and whether I work with paint or with camera, I like to let go of control to some extent, or to purposefully create situations in which something unexpected may happen. In this case I worked with a very talented young artist Anna Gregor, who developed a strong rapport with the puppets. We rehearsed very little. I would suggest a few key actions and describe the psychological state implied by the scene and let her work it out on the set. We usually took two, three takes for each scene. Sometimes there would be small accidents during a shoot: a prop would fall and turn over, a puppet would shift suddenly or refuse to move in a way Anna wanted, so there would be a short struggle between them, etc. Almost always such moments turned out to be the most interesting and psychologically convincing and were retained in the final cut.

We see *Philosophy of the Encounter* as a captivating inquiry into the grammar of body's language. Many artists express their ideas through representations of the body and by using their own bodies in their creative process. German visual artist Gerhard Richter once noted: "it is always only a matter of seeing: the physical act is unavoidable". How do you consider the relation between the abstract character of the issues you explore and the physical act of creating your artworks?

Physicality in art making is extremely important. An artwork does not exist as a pure idea, it is always embodied in

something – an image, an object, a film, a piece of text, an action. And of course, the physicality of the artist and of the materials she uses are parts of the equation. I think the best way to get a grasp of abstract ideas is to make them physical, to relate them to human body, to the fact of our physical existence – its precariousness and finality. This is the ultimate test for any theory. In a way, *Philosophy of the Encounter* is my attempt to scrutinize Althusser's theory from the perspective of the body – the body of his wife, but also my own and the body of the viewer. The most aggressive and powerful ideas often intrude into the life of the bodies, shaping, marking, bruising, and sometimes destroying them.

In this project the physical fact of the puppets dictated everything else – the work of the performer, the storyline, the filming process, etc. Puppets are exceptionally good receptors for the emotions and anxieties we project into the world. There is something both attractive and repelling about them, their grotesque and somehow pitiful imitation of the human form. They are capable of causing extreme emotion. The relationship between a puppeteer and puppets is that of mutual dependence. She is the master controlling them, but also a caretaker attending to their minute needs – holding and cradling them in her arms, carrying them around, dressing and undressing them, adjusting their limbs, clothes and hair. Their dumbness and passivity, the limpness of their bodies may be very vexing, very provoking to her. When shooting the film, I wanted the actor, Anna Gregor, to experience the whole spectrum of emotions that a close interaction with puppets may produce, and to convey

them to the viewer. Some scenes required Anna to be very tender and affectionate toward them, in others she had to physically abuse or even disfigure them – as in a scene where Hélène's body is symbolically disemboweled at a dining table. For Anna this performance turned out to be very poignant, emotional experience.

Your film walks the viewers on a tightrope between dream and reality, and we daresay it invites the viewers to draw inside their own memories and personal experiences in order to interpret what they see on the screen. How important is it for you to trigger the viewers' imagination to extract the meaning of your work? Were you interested in creating an *allegorical* work that reflects human condition?

I am not interested in making didactic or easy-to-digest artwork that tells the viewers how they should think or feel about things. My projects tend to be explorative and ambivalent; they are questions that interest or trouble me, or problems that are not or cannot be adequately resolved. Instead of leading the viewers to some predetermined conclusion, I try to open a space for them to step in and actively discover things by themselves, drawing on their own experiences and associations. Imagination plays a big part in this process.

And yes, you are right in that the film may be viewed as allegorical. In fact, it features a number of allegorical personages. One of them is *Philosopher's Mind* – a brain with male genitalia attached it, which floats above ground and spawns a flock of smaller brains, *Philosopher's*





Disciples. Another is Female Friend – the headless and armless figure of a woman or young girl, who visits Louis in his daydream. She is a feminine presence in its most basic, truncated, anatomical form. The puppeteer herself, in her all-white body suit that makes her anonymous but far from invisible, is an allegorical representation of the forces beyond our control, which, according to Althusser, determine how we act and think in each situation.

As you have remarked in your director's statement, your film attempts to reconstruct the story from Hélène's point of view and to explore its consequences for Althusser's philosophy. We daresay that your work conveys subtle criticism of androcentrism in our globalized, but still patriarchal contemporary age. Given that almost everything, from Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* to Marta Minujín's *Reading the News*, could be viewed as *political*, do you think that *Philosophy of the Encounter: Hélène's Story* could be considered a political work? Do you think that your being a woman provides your artwork with some special value?

Certainly, the project is highly political. It cannot be otherwise, if one of its protagonists is Louis Althusser, a Marxist philosopher who wrote about the role of ideology in society. According to Althusser, ideology is a set of concepts through which we live our relationship with reality, but which does not truly represent this reality. It makes us believe that we are free subjects, while in fact all our thoughts and actions are controlled by ideological institutions such as state, family, education, etc. There has

been little discussion on how Althusser's crime relates to his theory. But this relationship is important if we want to understand his ideas. At the time of the murder, was he, radical philosopher Louis Althusser, a free individual, a cog of in the oppressive ideological apparatus, or a puppet activated of some social or biological forces beyond his control? And what about Hélène? Was she another puppet playing out a predetermined role in this drama, or did she have a freedom to resist it? In the broadest sense, the project is about the power and gender dynamics, which are intrinsically political.

Regarding your second question: I don't think a woman's work is more or less valuable than the work made by a man. Besides, the problem of value in art is a slippery thing. But I hope my artwork may offer a slightly different perspective on things, especially in relation to fields such as philosophy, which has been traditionally dominated by men.

Music plays an important role in the narrative structure of the film and we have appreciated the way the tapestry of sound by Susan Kuo and Brian Riordan provides the footage with such an *ethereal atmosphere*: how do you see the relationship between sound and images?

For me the relationship between sound and image in a film is absolutely crucial. In many of my videos the sound, such as an off-screen narration, undermines or complicates the effect of the image, and vice versa. I think the tragedy of Hélène's and Louis's situation, especially in the final weeks before her death, was their inability to

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communicate with each other. This is why I decided not to use dialogue or narration in the film and show the protagonists locked in their respective silences, or struggling to express themselves through non-verbal murmurs, moans and mutterings. Naturally, the music score has become the thread that ties together all the scenes in the film and helps to convey the complex psychological states that the characters go through. I have been lucky to work with two excellent musicians from Pittsburgh: Susan Kuo who improvised with vocals and piano, and Brian Riordan, who took care of electronics, recording and production. This was the first time I collaborated with professional musicians and it was fascinating.

After Susan and Brian reviewed the footage, the three of us discussed the main character themes and the mood and emotional atmosphere of each scene, which ranged from tranquil, sleepy and sweet to harsh, aggressive and bombastic. With that in mind, Susan and Brian improvised and recorded a dozen of tracks in a single take without overdubs or edits. Susan performed vocals and played a grand piano using various implements to modulate its tone. Some of those were quite unconventional: for example, in one track she was sweeping the strings with her nails, and in another tapped the strings with a vibrator. At the same time, Brian was modifying the sound by shifting acoustic levels and adding electronic samples using his custom-built software. This resulted in wonderful improvised soundscapes, where the musicians' mechanical and electronic manipulations slip in and out of the listener's awareness. Brian and Susan have recently released three albums, Paragon's Pendulum, Axiom's Anchor and Canon's

interview







Crossbow, which include the original tracks and excerpts from the film score; they can be found at arborance.bandcamp.com.

You are an artist whose works have been showcased on numerous occasions, so before leaving this interesting conversation we want to ask about your view on the future of women in the contemporary art scene. For more than half a century women have been discouraged from producing something 'uncommon', however in the last decades women are finding their voices in art: how would you describe your personal experience as an unconventional artist? And what's your view on the future of women in this interdisciplinary field?

Showing work that is considered unconventional or somewhat difficult for the viewer is definitely not an easy task; many curators and galleries are hesitant to deal with it, thinking it may scare off the audiences. And as with most professions, women have a harder time in contemporary art and film than men. I can't predict the future for women artists, but I'd like to be optimistic. Certainly, things have been changing for the better in the past few decades. On the other hand, we see that women's rights, such as reproductive rights, are being drastically restricted in parts of the US, and this seems to be part of a major conservative trend which is generally not very favorable to gender equality.

Thanks a lot for your time and for sharing your thoughts, Tatiana. Finally, would you like to tell us readers something about your future projects? How do you see your work evolving?

Before starting on a new piece, I am going back to my old project, editing several dozens of audio interviews I collected in different parts of the US in 2014-2016. The interviews were recorded as part of a participatory project that explored various concepts of danger and fearfulness in American society. I invited different people to tell me a "scary" story about anything they wanted, and to draw in response to another person's narrative. I then reworked the stories and drawings into short films and released them online. The resulting "Scary Story" collection consists of over 50 films, most of them ranging from under 1 minute to about 12 minute in length. They can be viewed at <http://www.scarystoriesproject.com/>. Some of the films express storytellers' personal anxieties, but others relate to collective fears caused by the country's social and political problems.

Right now I am finishing another Scary Story film based on interviews I recorded in Texas in 2015. It is titled *No fear in Texas*, and this time the off-screen narration is combined with the footage I recorded at Texas zoos. The project's next and last installment will be based on the interviews I collected in New Orleans in 2016. When finally complete, the Scary Story collection will be a psychological portrait of pre-Trump America, with brewing tensions underneath a relatively calm surface and polarized opinions on all issues, from climate change to women's rights, gun control and others.

An interview by **Francis L. Quettier**

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