



the curators' quaderno



THE FLORENTINE / Press

WOMEN FILMMAKERS: TRAILBLAZERS

Women Trailblazers in Documentary Cinema

Created in conjunction with
the 65th Festival dei Popoli
International Documentary Film Festival
2 to 10 November 2024

Project and festival directors and curators

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Documenting women

It is hardly surprising to learn that the contributions of early female filmmakers were often forgotten or left unacknowledged. A few facts about Alice Guy-Blaché, the earliest female film director, serve to illustrate her singular achievements: she was the first filmmaker to make, in 1896, a narrative film, ***La Fée aux Choux*** (***The Cabbage Fairy***); she pioneered the use of audio recordings and was one of the first directors to use special effects, and one of the first women to manage her own studio. She was an early influence on Alfred Hitchcock and Sergei Eisenstein. Yet she had to fight to ensure these accomplishments were included in the historical record of the film industry.

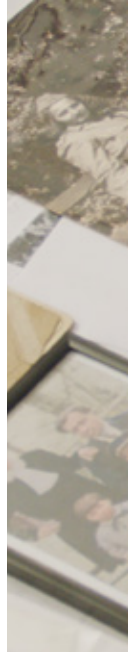
The first female documentary filmmakers were similarly sidelined. Frances H. Flaherty was an active partner in the creation of 1922's **Nanook of the North**, retrospectively dubbed the world's first documentary, but only her husband is credited as its director and producer. Zora Neal Hurston's short films of the everyday lives of ordinary Black people in the American South in the 1920's, such as **Children's Games** (1928), were, ironically, overshadowed by her own greater success as a novelist.

The Festival dei Popoli Institute for Social Documentary Cinema, which was founded in Florence in 1959, oversees the diffusion of documentary films through a world-wide network of collaborators. It maintains a digitalised archive of over 25,000 titles and organises training courses and workshops for documentary filmmakers. At the heart of this year's Festival dei Popoli is the rediscovery and celebration of female filmmakers whose work has not received the recognition it deserves. The focus on women, and the themes of rediscovery, archiving and training, mirror the mission and goals of the Calliope Arts Foundation: the restoration and documentation of, and dissemination of information on, women's achievements in the arts and sciences.

The Festival dei Popoli/Calliope Arts collaboration, 'Women Trailblazers in Documentary Cinema', foresees a three-year project of sponsorship to highlight women's perspectives in documentary storytelling and their past and present involvement in social and cultural movements as documented on film. From veteran Hungarian filmmaker Judit Elek to emerging French-Senegalese artist Mati Diop and the multinational members of the Feminist Frames project, the filmmakers and films in this year's festival reflect the depth and breadth of all that is possible in the world of documentaries, covering styles, subject matter and points of view that are as varied as the women behind the cameras. The festival provides a showcase for their work, which will be conserved for future generations of documentarians and film audiences.

Margie MacKinnon

President, Calliope Arts Foundation





The female gaze

The Festival dei Popoli, the oldest event specialising in documentaries in Europe, celebrates its 65th edition in Florence with a wide-ranging and articulated programme, with special focus on women's cinema. It is not a question of observing numerical equity merely by respecting quotas. Indeed, within the palimpsest of this edition, more than 50 percent of participating films are shot by women. Therefore, the real issue lies in providing an account of the extraordinary vitality expressed by a brand of cinema that, today more than ever, finds privileged representation in the female gaze.



JUDIT ELEK

The work of Hungarian director Judit Elek would be enough to fully bear witness to this reality. She is a filmmaker who, over the course of more than half a century, has been able to shine a light on the people and landscapes – both geographical and social – of her native country Hungary, with a profoundly humanist approach and the ability to merge the personal and the collective. She makes the stories of individuals into the history of a country. Starting in the 1960's, her cinema recounts the story of the radical transformation that followed World War II, as well detailing the wounds that never healed. Her oeuvre is one of absolute importance, which the Festival dei Popoli is presenting for the first time in Italy, in her works' restored versions.



MATI DIOP

History runs its course through the work of French-Senegalese director Mati Diop, one of the sharpest voices in contemporary cinema when it comes to portraying issues forming part of the colonialist legacy that continue to remain unresolved. Criticism of Western hegemony, present since her first films shot in Africa, finds a new declination in ***Dahomey*** (2024) – which was awarded the ‘Golden Bear’ at the Berlinale and presented, in its national premiere, in Florence. The film starts with the restitution of 26 sculptures, part of the colonial booty returned to Benin by France in 2021.

FEMINIST FRAMES

The international collective Feminist Frames is of great importance within our broad and varied programme. Composed of women filmmakers committed to creating a network of support and solidarity within the film industry from a feminist perspective, this group’s presence at the festival plays out in a series of meetings and special film screenings. Their work offers an important opportunity to reflect upon and think about crucial issues in the present, that can be traced back to distant roots.

Alessandro Stellino

Festival dei Popoli, Artistic Director





Judit Elek

IMPACT THROUGH GENERATIONS

"I became a filmmaker to be able to recount what I see around me, what I have lived, what the old people lived in this very 'draughty' little gateway country, where there is always a different power than what the people would like it to be – just and good. But they put up with it because they believe that this is the way of the world. And I, like a female Don Quixote, am fighting against this windmill, not giving into it, and I hope I die that way. Perhaps another motivation is that, after 60 years of work, I find that my oldest film is still alive, and it has an impact on people, if they have the opportunity to see it. In conclusion, I make films because I need to be loved; and through my films, I can perhaps make people love me who have never met me in person."

Judit Elek



Judit Elek was born in Budapest in 1937. As a child, she survived the Holocaust and the war in a ghetto. Aged 18, she participated in the 1956 uprising and she was in Paris in 1968, at the time of the student protests. The historical events and trauma she experienced have been a fundamental determinant of her filmmaking. Judit Elek has created an impressive oeuvre, lifting raw reality to the level of poetry with considerable social boldness.

As director and screenwriter, she has been a leading female creative artist of modern



Hungarian filmmaking, together with Márta Mészáros and Livia Gyarmathy. Judit Elek's work, spanning more than half a century, is remarkable in Hungarian and European film history. She has made taboo-smashing films that are free spirited, both in terms of theme and choice of form. They explore present-day psychological vignettes, sociological reports or works that serve to probe historical traumas.

György Ráduly

Director of the Hungary Film Archive





Judit Elek's initial works are lyrical analyses of loneliness, in which she stylised the spontaneity of *cinéma direct* into 'floating poetry'. **Encounter** (*Találkozás*, 1963) was the first Hungarian *cinéma direct* film featuring non-actors and improvised dialogue; it is about the fictional meeting of a nurse and a bachelor, the writer Iván Mándy. **Inhabitants of Castles** (*Kastélyok lakói*, 1966) and the two-part **How Long Does Man Live?** (*Meddig él az ember?*, 1967) were characteristic documentaries whose lyrical relationships are closely associated with the style of *cinéma direct*.

Elek's next films, the documentaries **A Hungarian Village** (*Istenmezején*, 1974) and **A Commonplace Story** (*Egyszerű történet*, 1975) were made over five years in an out-of-the-way mining village. By tracing the destiny and relationships of two girls who yearn to get away, it presents a 360-degree psychological report on the rural Hungary of 'socialism under construction', exploring the embittered state of the peasantry reduced to the proletariat, and their tangled system of prejudices.

György Ráduly

Director of the Hungary Film Archive



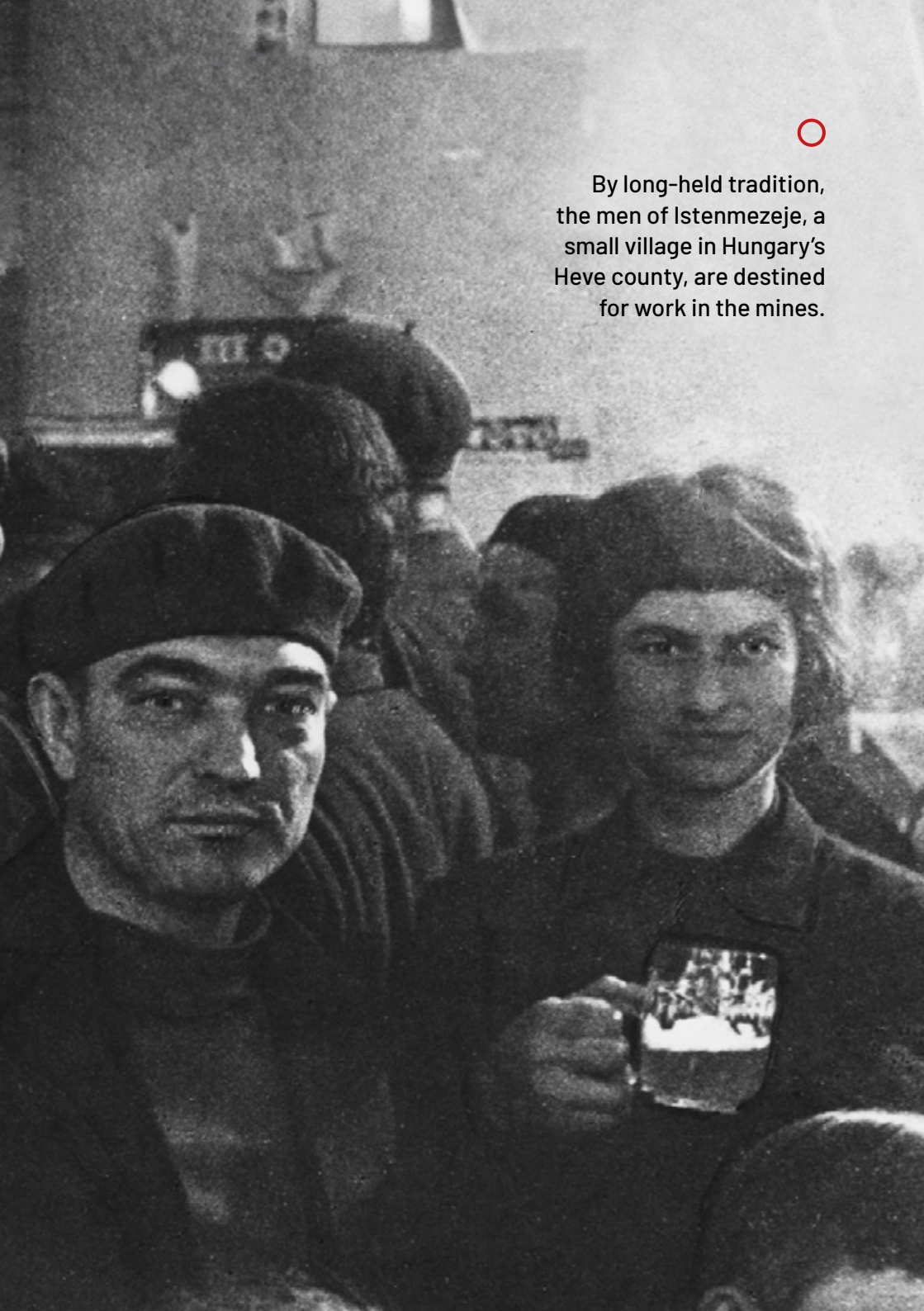
An encounter, a face and a word: from the earliest rehearsals, these are the key terms with which to approach Elek's cinema. They are words the director interprets in a poetic or creative sense. Her camera does not simply observe; it is not merely there as the situation unfolds – according to the guiding idea of *cinéma direct*, which constitutes another fundamental lesson of her cinema – rather, it seems to pulsate, to move, participating in the character's emotional drifting, by approaching or receding, almost as if dancing with and towards them.

Daniele Dottorini

Curator, Tribute to Judit Elek



By long-held tradition,
the men of Istenmezeje, a
small village in Hungary's
Heve county, are destined
for work in the mines.







Mati Diop

REINVENTING MY APPROACH

“What distinguishes documentary from fiction concerns, above all, the question of the writing process. In documentaries, the writing is, first and foremost, a point of view, on people or on a situation. Writing begins with the film language that translates (or betrays) your relationship to the world, to other people and to yourself. After my previous film **Atlantics** (2019), I needed to re-experience a free writing and shooting process, rather than a work of fiction. I like to break free of format conventions, and I like the idea of reinventing my approach to this writing with each film. I visualized **Atlantics** as a Gothic tale, while **Dahomey** is a fantasy documentary. If people come out wondering what they just saw, having had a unique and exciting experience, then I feel I have contributed to making cinema more surprising and innovative.”

Mati Diop

The Poetics of *Dahomey*

Dahomey is a poetic and engaging work of art that explores wide-ranging issues that touch on the long path of decolonisation, such as appropriation, self-determination and restitution. Filmed in November 2021, the documentary charts 26 royal treasures from the Kingdom of Dahomey that are due to leave Paris and return to their country of origin: the present-day Republic of Benin. Using multiple perspectives, Mati Diop questions how these artifacts should be received in a country that has reinvented itself in their absence.





One of the sculptures
belonging to the Kingdom
of Dahomey upon its
return to Benin.



"When I first heard the term 'restitution' in 2017, I was still writing **Atlantics**. As an afro descendant filmmaker, the word resonated deeply within me. Fundamentally, the issue runs through my work. Also, the films I made in Dakar between 2009 and 2019 speak to a process of return; going back to my African origins, to a part of myself that was buried for too long under the hegemony of my Western environment. Terms like 'restitution', 'reverence', 'return' and 'reparation' came together in my head.

As perplexing as Emmanuel Macron's announcement that France would return 26 sculptures to Benin may have been for me, the project for the repatriation of African cultural heritage within five years was a shock.

I sadly realized that I had never imagined the possibility of something like that happening in my lifetime, perhaps out of resignation. I mean, I had never imagined what restitution might actually look like, and while trying to visualize it, a film was already crystallizing in my mind."

Mati Diop





Feminist Frames

Feminist Frames is an international group of feminist filmmakers who produce independent films in different genres, in creative dialogue with various artistic disciplines. The aim of Feminist Frames is to create a network for support, solidarity and co-creation from a feminist perspective. Part of the group previously came together during the three-year project *Purple Meridians* (2020–2023).

Combining two recently discovered unique archival sources, ***Remanence*** (2024), directed by Sabine Groenewegen, portrays a movement that brought women together in collective action in the 1930's.



Remanence reveals the lost history of a Dutch women's peace movement, which was connected to a larger international women's anti-war network. While the participants united thousands of women through door-to-door community work, the Dutch government listed the movement as dangerous to the state. In 1981, two historians tracked down surviving members and recorded their testimonies onto cassette tapes, which were never replayed until now.



Remanence also connects these women's testimonies to a recently discovered film archive. It hosted never-before-seen footage of 15,000 women assembling in Rotterdam in 1939, for its final peace march before the city was bombed. Its creator joined the resistance during World War II and was executed, but his film survived in a private archive. Groenewegen's film re-connects his imagery to the voices of some of the women present that day.

Rosa Barotsi

Feminist Frames, Coordinator



"I think about Bosnia's recent past as if it were a human being, living through the future consequences of its past, which has been predetermined for us, and therefore, I entered the film space as a woman living in Bosnia."

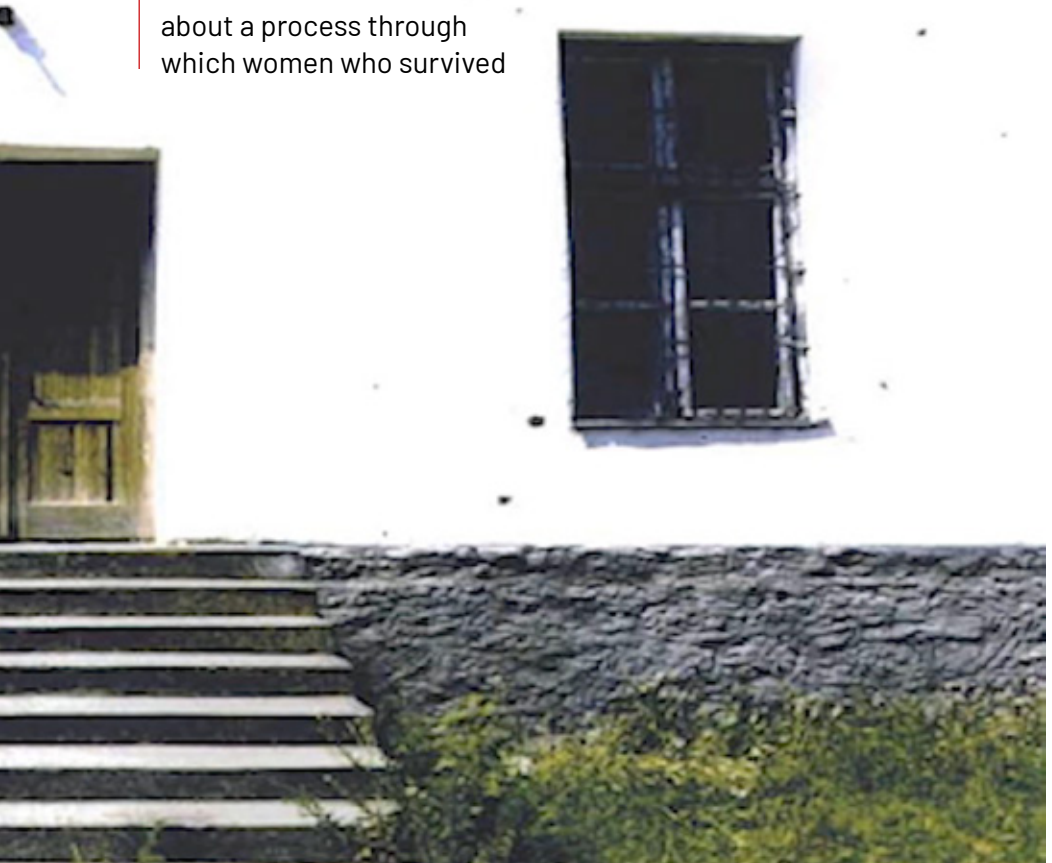
Kumjana Novakova



"Working solely with archives and testimonies, ***Silence of Reason*** documents the singular experiences of violence and torture by women from the Foča rape camps during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which have become our collective memories, surpassing time and space. The only thing I did was to open archives that otherwise would not have been accessible, and I transposed those archives to the screen. So it's a cinematic document about a process through which women who survived

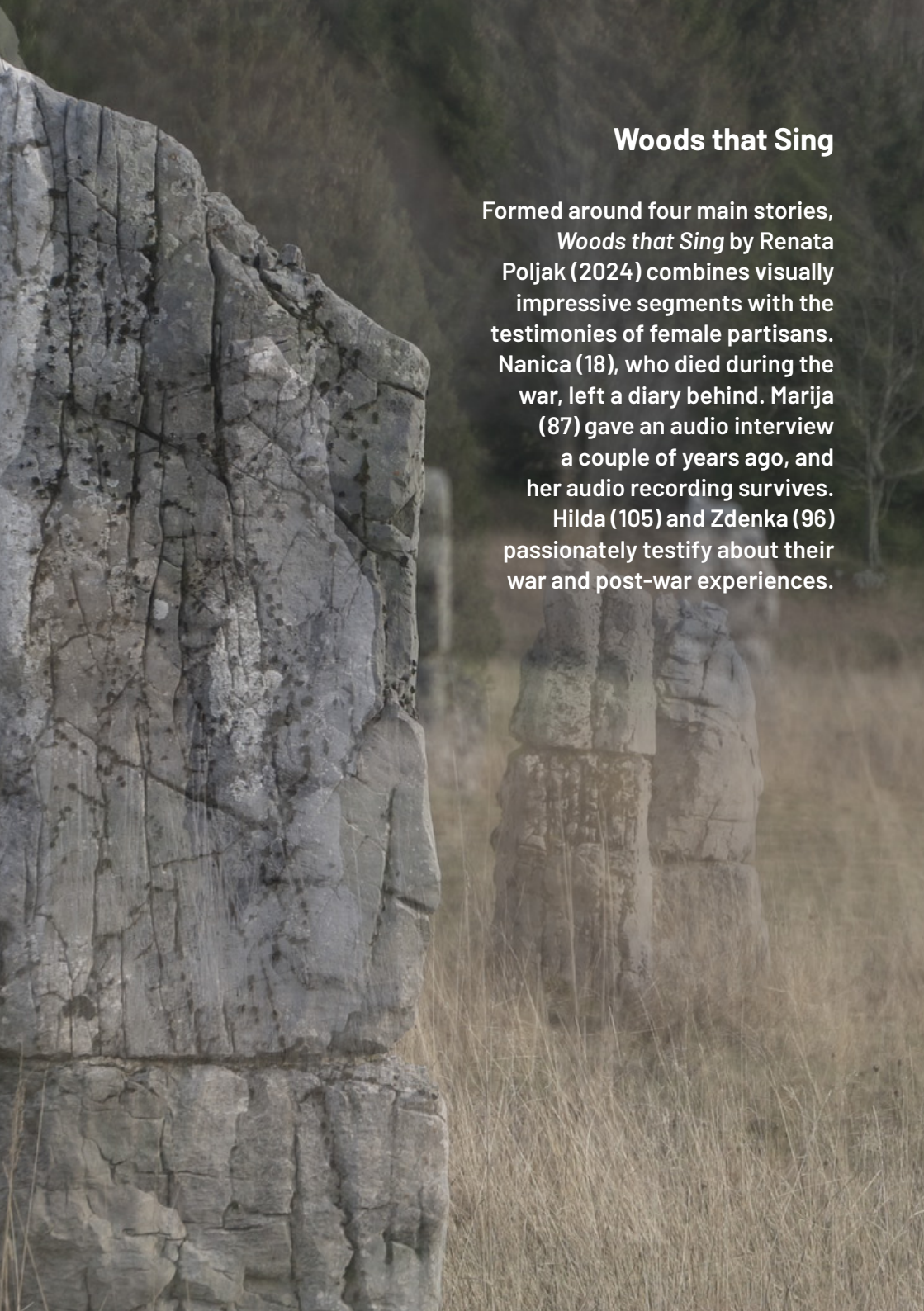
violence rose above individual trauma to change the lives of women who would come after them. International law had not recognized rape as a war crime and a crime against humanity, until this trial. If these women had not found the strength to testify, and had not used their voices, we would not be in the position we are in today."

Kumjana Novakova





"I got a hold of a photo album, found where old and discarded things are sold. On its cover it says: **Å amacâ Sarajevo '47**. Black-and-white photos are neatly arranged. Many have faded with time. The photos have people in them. I know nothing about them. They are very young. They are chasing a ball, listening to poetry, learning and building a railway line, bridges, tunnels and stations. They dig the earth, break the rocks. They permanently change the landscape and lives. The railway line built with bare hands, in seven months. Without any machinery, without any modern tricks. Only with sweat, hands, bodies and engineering knowledge. 211,000 young people of Yugoslavia, 5,735 young people from 42 foreign countries. Out of the ruins of war, out of the ruins of their own emotions, out of the pain and sadness due to their fallen loved ones, out of the underdevelopment of the country, they built the railway line, and it built them".



Woods that Sing

Formed around four main stories, *Woods that Sing* by Renata Poljak (2024) combines visually impressive segments with the testimonies of female partisans. Nanica (18), who died during the war, left a diary behind. Marija (87) gave an audio interview a couple of years ago, and her audio recording survives. Hilda (105) and Zdenka (96) passionately testify about their war and post-war experiences.



*"It is at this point that
the need to write
history arises."*

"By applying a retroactive feminist gaze, 'history' is reopened and appears as an unfinished, ever-changing process, whose scenes and images are reflected by the shards of a broken mirror (which is used to reflect the representations of women produced by patriarchy). Ultimately, these fragments are re-assembled by the women [in the film] to form a new picture, one that remains in the dialectical space of promise and incompleteness, demanding another future."

Constanze Ruhm



Multi-faceted shards of storytelling

"Let's say I'm the camera and I'm pointed at you, and next to me, there is a tripod as well, which has a camera with a mirror on it, positioned at an angle where the camera can capture you both... plus what's happening over there... This is how the images are made to appear as if they are superimposed.

This technique creates an image whereby the camera actually sees two images, capturing the reality in front of the camera and its reflection next to it at the same time. It serves as a metaphor for the interconnectedness of time and space, which includes metaphorical spaces, feminist spaces.

One time, during filming, it just so happened that the mirror we were using suddenly fell and shattered into a thousand pieces, which was really fortunate because we continued filming with a shard. This fragment of shattered mirror has greatly inspired my thinking. My focus has always been on media art, on film, on the moving image, video installation, and of course, all the related theories. There is always that special multi-faceted feministic perspective."

Constanze Ruhm

Photo credits

Cover: Festival dei Popoli 2024, poster

Film stills in alphabetical order:

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Judit Elek on the set of **Memories of a River**, Hungary Film Archive: pp. 2, 3

Judit Elek © Lucinda Douglas-Menzies: pp. 10, 11

The Lady from Constantinople with Géza Gonda, Elemér Ragályi and Judit Elek © Endre Réger: pp. 14, 15

Mati Dopi © Henry-Roy: pp. 18, 19

Constanze Ruhm, personal archive: p. 32

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Linda Falcone

tcq editor

Festival dei Popoli

2 – 10 November 2024

Venue dates and times for screenings are available at:

www.festivaldeipopoli.org

“When we talk about the early years of cinema, there is no separating the ‘history of women in film’ from the ‘history of film’. Women have been there from the beginning, and have shaped the medium in transformative ways.”

MaryAnn Johanson

A continued commitment to Florence

Calliope Arts Foundation strives to further public knowledge of female contributions to the visual arts, literature, science, music and social history in Florence, London and the world. Co-founded in 2021 by Margie MacKinnon and Wayne McArdle, it provides support for restorations, exhibitions and education, as well as curating and underwriting publications such as ***The Curators’ Quaderno***, created with The Florentine Press, and ***Restoration Conversations*** magazine and broadcast.



*"I make films that only
I can make, and I have
faith in this process."*

Kumjana Novakova

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