

Laura Grisi in conversation with Germano Celant (fragments).

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**Laura Grisi:** I want to describe the cultural and family context of my childhood. What my father liked best was reading and doing research in physics, mathematics, and geometry. He also studied and carried out experiments with radio and with magnetic fields. This wasn't his real work, but it was what interested him most. Two of his projects— one for the remote control of objects by radio, another dealing with the electrical energy produced through an exchange of magnetic waves—were analyzed by a group of American technicians. They found his work so interesting that they invited him to work with them at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, but he preferred to continue his experiments on his own. I used to talk to him about geometry, logic, gravity, relativity, and everything else I wanted to know in those fields. [...] My father had a film production and distribution company. One of his films won first prize at the Venice Film Festival. He was also very interested in automobiles; he bought one of the first Cisitalias, a beautifully designed car, famous in the 50s, and now exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art in New York. His work brought him into contact with many directors and writers: he knew Alessandro Blasetti, Roberto Rossellini, Augusto Genina (with whom he made two films), Leonide Moguy, Vitaliano Brancati, and Giuseppe Bertolucci. This was the climate and the context in which my brother Fausto and I grew up. He too is involved with film - he has made three, and now has a film and advertising company in Venezuela. In fact, I seem to be the only one in my family who is not a professional filmmaker. As it turned out, my son Brando started his own film production company right after high school, writing and directing his own series of films for television.

My mother was Italian, but was born in Istanbul. She knew six languages well, and almost always spoke French to us at home. She used to paint watercolors, using images of the Turkish landscape, views of Istanbul, and colorful street scenes. [...] She often told us about her childhood in Turkey; her father, my grandfather, had owned construction companies and had built, among other things, a harbor on the Bosphorus and roads in Anatolia. [...] Then my mother would describe the old city, the souks and mosques, and she would tell me about the Turkish women who at the time never went out on the streets, but had arcaded corridors from one house to another, so they could move about without being seen from the outside. Then there was a great rebellion, and foreigners had to leave the country; my grandparents' villa was burned down, and they managed to flee to Rhodes, in Greece (where I was later born).

Germano Celant: Amid the maps and the itineraries covered, there is your own city, and the whole world of education and school. Then the places one visits become a form of knowledge; one's encounters with people from foreign countries and cultures come to seem sometimes curious, sometimes different, and what is different offers a crucial perspective on one's familiar environment. To what artistic realities do you owe your formation?

**LG:** I attended the art school in Rome and then took classes on and off at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris. We were in that city because my father was producing a film with French partners. When my family returned to Rome, I stayed on in Paris for the entire season, and the people I met and the books I read there were far more important to me than my academic studies. [...]

When I got back to Rome from Paris, I began to frequent galleries like the Tartaruga, the Marlborough, and the Attico, and I met many artists there. I also went to Milan, where I knew Piero Manzoni, Vincenzo Agnetti, Gastone Novelli, and Lucio Fontana. [...] All this went on,

however, for only a short period, because I stayed in Rome just a few months. During that period, I had met Folco Quilici, the film director and writer who had made *Blue Continent* and *Last Paradise*; and just a month later we were married and left for South America, where he was shooting a film in the Andes. From that time on I traveled for long periods with him, which was an extraordinary experience. [...] While I was traveling, I could only make easily portable pieces like gouaches and drawings, and so I concentrated on photography and writing. [...] After a year I spent traveling between the Andes, the pampas, Bolivia, Terra di Missiones, and Buenos Aires, my son, Brando Quilici, was born in Buenos Aires. We spent another year in Polynesia, and many months in Africa, and then returned to Rome, where I started my first paintings.

GC: To continue with my interpretation of the dimension of movement, it seems clear to me that your work with variability, in framing devices and in the mobility demanded of the observer, is tied to cinema. Your first paintings progress from perception to action: to "read" the work involves moving sliding panels, almost like movie frames inserted one upon the other, to define a new image emerging from the "montage." [...]

LG: At the core of my "Variable Paintings" lies the desire to use the image over successive periods of time, to imbue the same image with different meanings. They are an attempt to move beyond the static structure of the canvas, making it mutable. [...] In the "Variable Paintings" the work process was a dialogue that involved the viewer; it was a reaction to the accepted historical way of reading an artwork. I was looking for a way to have the work convey many different moments of perception, escaping the static condition of a univocal image. [...]

GC: Because of this open dimension of the work, your research tends to go beyond traditional linguistic frontiers, moving away from painting and arriving at installation and environmental art, with incursions into materials like Plexiglas and artificial fog.

LG: I had been included in the Biennale in 1966, where I showed my first "Variable Paintings." There I met Leo Castelli-with his wife, Toini - and Ileana Sonnabend for the first time; Leo liked the idea that the sliding panels of my paintings were movable. Through that exhibition I had my first group show in New York, in October of that year. Organized by the Bonino Gallery, the show was called "Italy New Tendencies." I had never been to New York before. Many important artists came to the opening - I remember Barnett Newman there with Frank Stella and Larry Poons, and also Alan Solomon, who then decided to organize a larger American show of young Italian artists. The following year he came to Italy and chose the pieces for a group show at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston-works by Kounellis, Pistoletto, Valerio Adami, Getulio Alviani, Pascali, Ceroli, and my "Neon Paintings." The show later traveled to the Jewish Museum in New York, and there I met Leo Castelli again, looking at my neon works. The next time I met him was in Boston, in 1971, at the "Earth Air Fire Water" exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, in which I showed my water pieces. Two years later Leo Castelli gave me my first exhibition at his gallery. [...]

Distillation as a meditative quality: the counting of grains of sand as a measurement of time, sand and spiral a suggestion of infinity, the spiral as unending circular motion, representing endless time. This work, *The Measuring of Time*, 1969, was the first of my three "Distillations" pieces, inspired by travels through several deserts. The second, *Distillations: 3 Months of Looking*, 1970, was a piece I made during travels in places like the Leeward Islands, Malaysia, the Philippines, the Sulu Islands, and the New Hebrides; it was an analysis of my personal, visual, and physical sensations. The third piece, *Distillations: Choice and Choosing 61 from 5000*, 1970, was a collection and selection of images from earlier trips, like a grid of different realities restructured in a single image.