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The Voice of the Wet Concrete: A Conversation

Carmen Amengual and Soyoung Yoon

Carmen Amengual, *A Non-Coincidental Mirror* (still), 2022–ongoing.

On January 14, 2025, in conjunction with Carmen Amengual's solo exhibition at Smack Mellon Gallery, e-flux Screening Room presented a single-channel version of A Non-Coincidental Mirror, *a film by Amengual commissioned as part of her 2022–2024 Vera List Center for Art and Politics Fellowship. The screening was followed by a conversation between Amengual and the writer Soyoung Yoon and by a Q & A with the audience. The transcript of this conversation was edited for the present publication.*

Soyoung Yoon (SYY): To begin, I highlight for all of us here how your film *A Non-Coincidental Mirror* pivots around the First and Second Third World Filmmakers Meetings, held in Algiers in 1973 and Buenos Aires in 1974, respectively. Your film also traces an aborted cinematic project—a collective desire for a film and for a different kind of cinema—following the passing of your mother, whose archive you inherited. This journey of archival recovery, research, and interpretation forms the backbone of the work. Also, before we dive into your film's processes, contexts, and choices, I'd like to acknowledge that our conversation today continues a dialogue that started several years ago: Carmen and I first met through the Independent Study Program [ISP], which is affiliated with the Whitney Museum. I specifically bring this up because the ISP's founding in 1968 was rooted in the aspirations for radical pedagogy that directly resonate with the aspirations that your film seeks to attend to. In a way, your film listens to what you, the narrator, describe as "the voice of the wet concrete" that laid the foundation for the modernist architecture, which functions in your film as a signifier for the dream of cultural revolution, a signifier currently in ruins.

I'd like to start our conversation by asking about your experience of watching your film today in the setting of a black box theater. Before the screening, you mentioned that this was your first time seeing it in this context. What are your thoughts on this shift from the gallery installation at Smack Mellon to the cinema?

Carmen Amengual (CA): I'm still processing it—it's quite strange. The white cube of a gallery dissolves our bodily presence in space differently than a black box cinema does. The installation at Smack Mellon allows more space to display the research and creates a space for slow attention, a certain distance, because it is not fully immersive. In the gallery, the documents and

materials function almost as footnotes to the film, which I know has a convoluted narrative. The installation also presents three screens running simultaneously: the main screen, which presents this film, and two peripheral channels that sometimes mirror the main film and sometimes diverge. This multi-perspectival arrangement echoes the fragmented narratives within the film itself. In some ways, this disorientation is also grounding. But experiencing it in a cinema setting, as a singular channel projection, makes it feel more linear and immersive in a different way.

SYY: One element that stands out at Smack Mellon is how your mother's archive is positioned in relation to the rest of the exhibition. In the single-channel film, we are introduced to it as part of the body of the film—you describe how the archival material functions as footnotes to the film. However, in the exhibition, we are also invited to study the archive much more closely—spend more time with it, read the documents for ourselves. Indeed, in the single-channel film, there is a notable tension, even ambivalence, between the archival material and its representation. For instance, you cast voice actors who not so much read aloud as ventriloquize the texts, but there is a noticeable gap between the contemporaneity of their voices and what one might expect of revolutionary rhetoric [of the 1960s and '70s]. It's a dissonant, deliberate gap, emphasized by the flickering of the frame—a choice that further unsettles the authority of the narration. This contrasts with the experience of the exhibition, where viewers engage directly with archival materials at their own pace.

And with regard to the authority of the narration, I'd like to discuss some of the historical contexts that your film engages with. For some in the audience today, the idea of Algiers as the "capital of the Third World" might be rather unfamiliar. When you and I first met, we discussed a recently published memoir by Elaine Mokhtefi, who recounts her time in Algiers, where she, as a New Yorker, unexpectedly became a translator for the Black Panthers in exile in there. For others in the audience, including myself, Algiers might be more immediately associated with the wars of decolonization—especially through films like Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). Your film, then, offers an entry point into grasping the utopian vision of Third Worldism that pivots around Algiers. But now I'd like you to expand on *another* historical context that might not be immediately apparent to the audience, one that pivots around Buenos Aires—not your mother's Buenos Aires of the 1970s, but *your* Buenos Aires. Specifically, could you speak about your own background and how your generational perspective—shaped by the history of Argentina—relates to your mother's aborted film project and the eventual dissolution of the Third World Institute?

CA: Thank you for that question. I belong to the cohort born during the final years of the dictatorship in Argentina. When I was a child, democracy had just returned. My first memories are associated with the return to democracy—it was a moment of both celebration and deep reckoning with the past. I was only three years old, but I remember my mother taking me to protests to demand the prosecution of the military and their allies, and our home often hosted friends of hers who had returned from exile. They told stories that I was too young to fully understand.

Many Argentinian writers and artists of my generation are still processing the memory of that period and our inheritance of that history. It is truly a collective labor of memory and processing, but one that is done individually, through personal histories. Today, with a very conservative government in

Argentina, the politics of memory—once central to the transition to democracy—are being challenged again. It seems we must continue telling these stories over and over, with all the mediations that history imposes on us.

In my work, I sought to create a space, both in the film and in the installation, to reflect on these mediations. I didn't want to tell a totalizing story, because I don't have a full story. What I have is a perspective, shaped by layers upon layers of interpretation. The myth of Algiers, for example—its constructed image as a revolutionary capital, the historiographical battles over its representation—parallels the way Argentina's history has been shaped and contested over time.

SYY: I really want to emphasize this idea of inheritance. We tend to imagine inheritance as a form of continuity, but your film underscores how continuity can only be achieved—can only maybe be achieved—through immense effort. Instead of seamless, continuous transmission, we see gaps and breaks, ruptures. A forthcoming publication on your work discusses this divide, particularly for those of your generation who were born during the dictatorship. There is a stark contrast between your mother's past and your experience of growing up, a rupture between your mother and you. I'm struck by how, at age three, you experienced both the euphoria of liberation and the trauma of the disappeared. And the fact that now, you and I both happen to be mothers of three-year-olds, adds another layer of, let's say, context. The film engages deeply with these questions of inheritance, rupture, and memory.

CA: Yes, that was what surprised me most when I first encountered my mother's letters. The affective texture, the trust in cultural projects, and the belief that art could effect real change—these elements stood out. As a teenager in Argentina in the 1990s, when MTV and American pop culture were pervasive, many of my mother's returning friends seemed dogmatic to me. Of course they were critical of the way I submitted to "cultural imperialism," and in some way I think they saw in the teenagers of my generation the failure of their revolutionary project. But reading their letters—realizing they were in their thirties when organizing these projects—gave me a new perspective. Their friendships, their trust in each other, the money they lent one another to sustain their work—it was a collective body I had never been able to access before. Until I read those letters, my perception of these attempted revolutionaries had been shaped by a sense of defeat. They had been framed as people who had lost, who were bitter, who had not realized their dreams.

SYY: The film conveys this feeling powerfully. You received this inheritance—this box of letters, memorabilia, this archive—but for me, what seems to have struck you most is the tone, the affect of your mother's voice in this archive. It's familiar, yet so different. You embarked on a journey to locate that tone. One particularly remarkable moment in *A Non-Coincidental Mirror* is when this search is punctuated by an immense, grand musical score. It's the moment when we see the shots of the largest public cemetery in Buenos Aires. The modernist architecture of the cemetery becomes a central visual motif in the film, both at its beginning and end. Could you speak more about your choice to center the cemetery in this way?

CA: This incredible building is the Municipal Cemetery of Buenos Aires, Chacarita, specifically the Sixth Pantheon. This project was designed and

directed by Ítala Fulvia Villa, one of Argentina's first female architects, a graduate from the public University of Buenos Aires, and it was built in the 1950s. My mother, who was also an architect and alumna of the same university, lived in Algiers for a year, working closely with the team of Brazilian architects who were involved with the city's urban planning efforts after independence. This was the group of architects working with Oscar Niemeyer in the making of the University of Science and Technology, the University of Constantine, and the sports venue La Coupole, which it is shown in the film. But the reason she went to Algiers in the first place was to meet with Susi Sichel and Jorge Giannoni, who were deeply involved in the organization of the Third World Filmmakers Meeting. She collaborated with them in planning this documentary film that never came to fruition. When it was clear the film wasn't going to be made, she returned to Argentina and continued her career in architecture. The cemetery, in some ways, became a metaphor for that moment—the path not taken, the projects left unrealized, an especially resonant site for me. My mother always remained a cinephile, deeply invested in film. Many years later she took film courses at the university, but filmmaking always remained in a dream dimension. But perhaps the most significant factor in choosing the cemetery as a site of remembrance is that my mother died from an accident she had at a construction site where she was working.

Ítala Fulvia Villa, despite her remarkable contributions, was largely forgotten for many years. After I filmed on the site, I found that two researchers, the Brazilian Soraya Jebai, and the French Léa Namer in collaboration with Ana María León had recently written studies on Villa's work, which are included in the exhibition and provided aerial images that I used to design the tables where the documents are displayed.

There is an interesting contrasting parallel between Villa and Niemeyer that speaks of architecture's role in nation building, but also of course of gender inequalities, Villa being completely forgotten while Niemeyer is perhaps the most famous South American architect. Niemeyer's work was supported by Houari Boumédiène and the military faction of the National Liberation Front, which of course had its own contradictions. These layers of political and architectural history are deeply embedded in the spaces my film explores.

SYY: I also found it compelling how the film grapples with the dream of Third Worldism—not only as an idea but as an affect present in your mother's voice, in friendships—as well as with our distance from that dream. You approach Third Worldism not necessarily through the aesthetics of the 1960s and '70s, but through that of modernism. As a teacher, I have found modernism increasingly difficult to teach because it requires an understanding of avant-gardism, revolution, and counter-revolution—concepts that feel increasingly distant. To grasp something like a public cemetery designed as a society of equals, one has to summon a historical imagination that is not readily available today. This makes your choice of sites all the more striking.

CA: Yes, and that site, in particular, is now falling apart. It is beautiful, but the decay is striking. I wish film could convey smell.

SYY: Yes, the narration speaks of the broken ventilation system… The cemetery as ruin.

CA: Yes, I wanted to highlight that ruin specifically. The idea of seeing history at a moment of indeterminacy—that is what the "wet concrete" represents.

It's about looking beyond what we know happened, exploring a space where possibilities still exist. Returning to my mother's letters, I was struck by the language of possibility they contained, which contrasts sharply with our present moment.

SYY: That also speaks to the shots of the architecture of the University of Buenos Aires—what it was meant to be, what it became, and what it might still hold within it. There are also those shots of the guardian figures, gargoyles, monsters, on the columns of the university's buildings, as the narrator says, guardians of a university that they could not protect. In your film, these images evoke the dream of Third Worldism, like the public cemetery where your mother's body is laid to rest, like your mother's aborted film. I use the term aborted, because it brings to mind a course that I am teaching right now on art and the body politic, a course around Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein.* That novel, too, is about an aborted body—"I, the miserable and the abandoned," says the creature, "am an abortion"—stitched together from fragments, emerging in the aftermath of revolution and counter-revolution. Your film operates similarly: it pieces together historical fragments while emphasizing rupture, without nostalgia or sentimentality.

CA: Yes, I wanted to avoid both total intellectualization and nostalgia. Making this film was a process—an exercise, really—in learning what it takes to make something, to persist. I worked with scanned and digitized materials, re-performing history. I didn't study film formally, so in some way the film exhibits my own learning process. I also deliberately avoided replicating or showcasing the aesthetics of Third Cinema, both for financial reasons—many films are lost or poorly preserved, and obtaining rights to show excerpts of these films in mine would be costly—but also because I was more interested in showing what remains and seeing how we can still engage with it today.

SYY: Talking about your initiation into film, I also recall that in our initial studio visit at the ISP, there was another Argentine filmmaker, Jazmín López, at the ISP too. While her style is very different from yours, she too engages with the cultural revolutions of the 1960s, this inheritance. One of her earlier films, *Leones* (Lions, 2013), captures the experience of life in limbo, its strange vibrancy—what it means to exist in the afterlife of history, stuck in a liminal state. Your film also starts in a cemetery, one that is also portrayed with a strange, unnerving vibrancy—the long, full shots, the musical score, "the voice of the wet concrete." There's a continuity here in how both of you grapple with inheritance. And what does it mean to be a student today? The shots of the University of Buenos Aires resonate differently now, especially in light of the current political and economic situation in the United States as well as the continued repression of student protests against the war. In this context, the modernist aesthetics and Third Worldist ideals that your film and exhibition address take on a new and different urgency.

Question: I have two comments. First, I'm curious about your use of the term Third World. By the 1970s, this term became politically charged and was later replaced by underdeveloped countries, which in turn became developing countries. What do you think about these shifts? What does it mean to categorize nations in this way?

Second, I was struck by your mention of the Non-Aligned Movement. Having grown up in Yugoslavia, then a socialist country, I know that it started in Belgrade in the 1960s, bringing together 120 countries across geographies. When I first traveled to North Africa, I was shocked by the familiarity—the

smell of detergent was identical to the one in my home country. It made me think about how resource scarcity affects everything: film, architecture, clothing, even the sensory experience of a city. Your film captures this beautifully.

CA: Thank you. The Third World filmmakers at the time deliberately chose to call themselves that. It was not just a label but an assertion of independence. The aim of the Third World Filmmakers Meeting was to build production and distribution structures outside of European and United States industries. There were, of course, radical filmmakers in the West, but this movement sought complete autonomy—an idea rooted in Marxist thought, emphasizing control over the means of production and distribution. That's why I use the term Third World. I don't have a strong position on whether it should still be used today, but I recognize that we are now in a strange moment where Cold War terminologies seem to be re-emerging.

SYY: Yes, and I'd add that we should distinguish between the Third World as a political movement and the Third World as an economic classification, aka underdevelopment. They share terminology, deliberately, but their meanings are distinct.

CA: Absolutely. There's an excellent book by Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (2007), which explores the concept of the Third World in depth. Your comment about familiarity resonates with me. When I was in Algeria, I also felt a strange sense of recognition, which was disorienting. That familiarity acted as an obstruction—I had to push through it to engage with the place's actual reality. At the same time, I saw parallels between my experience and those of Algerian artists and filmmakers today. Many of them, like my generation in Argentina, see their peers leaving the country in large numbers. The diaspora plays a crucial role in maintaining cultural exchange, especially for those who lack the means to leave. That dynamic—of mobility, separation, and the role of art in bridging those gaps—is something I continue to think about deeply.

Question: Could you talk about your motivation for shooting on 16mm film? At the beginning of the screening, there was a reference to the impermanence of film—the idea that film will eventually disappear. But I imagine that besides this metaphorical level, there were other motivations for using 16mm.

CA: Yes, absolutely. I really wanted to engage with the material experience of filmmaking. This is my first film, and I wanted to understand what it means to shoot on film—what it entails in terms of logistics, permits, and overall difficulty of its materiality. For example, when we filmed in the cemetery, we couldn't get a permit. We had to hide in the corridors with a big ARRI camera, the tripod, and other equipment. It was incredibly challenging, but also exhilarating.

There are letters from Susi Sichel (one of the Argentinians organizers of the Filmmakers Meetings) to my mother where they are discussing the documentary they ultimately never completed. In these letters, they reflect on how the process of making a film structures one's thoughts. Shooting on analog film forces you to edit in your mind before you shoot. It forces you to make decisions on site and then to work around them when editing. Unlike digital, where you can capture everything and decide later, working with film imposes a discipline—it requires a certain analytical process that I found inspiring.

Financial and logistical constraints also played a role. Traveling with 16mm film, especially going to Algiers, was very stressful. The difficulties of passing film through airport security created so many interesting situations. Some security officers had never seen anything like it before. Those moments of conflict—having to explain what this medium was—became part of the experience.

Question: I have a question about the actors. I'd love to hear more about your decision to use American accents. It was quite jarring, especially when juxtaposed with Third World filmmakers in contrast to Hollywood and European cinema. Could you speak more about that choice?

CA: That's a great question. I wanted to ensure that the voice you hear is that of a reporter, not a filmmaker. The actors are reading from a journalistic report rather than performing direct speech. The archive I worked with didn't contain any recordings of certain figures speaking, and I had no access to audio archives of them. I wanted to create a layer of mediation—to frame the information in a journalistic tone and see how that affects the audience's reception. I didn't feel comfortable asking actors to impersonate figures like Santiago Álvarez or other filmmakers from that era. Instead, I opted for a neutral delivery that makes clear this is a recitation of an archive, not a reenactment. Of course, this choice is contextual. If I were to screen the film in Argentina, I would likely need to redo the entire voiceover with a different accent.

Question: I wanted to ask about the act of making this film—whether it feels like an act of completion or an introduction. To me, the film seems like a beautiful introduction to something more. In some ways, it feels like a film, but at the same time, it doesn't entirely fit within that category. It also seems as though you are finishing something your mother started while simultaneously introducing something new. How do you perceive the space between introduction and completion?

CA: That's an important question. One thing I need to clarify is that this is an evolving project—it isn't finished. This film is the first iteration of a much larger body of work. So, I don't think of it as an act of completion. Instead, it places me in a very particular relationship with my mother—one that is both reflective and speculative. Even within the film, I remain a daughter. I may become a filmmaker through this process, but this is not a Third Cinema film, I am not filming in a high-risk situation. There is something playful about this film, despite its serious themes. In that sense, the film is simultaneously an act of mourning and an act of play. It is not an ending but rather a means of processing, of creating space for something else to emerge—whether that be new work, new interpretations, or an entirely different iteration of the project.

SYY: Yes, and this is one of the reasons why I asked Carmen to speak more about the historical context, to historicize herself as context. There are cultural presuppositions about the structure, the dynamics of inheritance—what it means to continue a parent's project, what a mother-daughter relationship might entail. For instance, when I first encountered Carmen's work, I was inclined to see it through the framework of lineage—this idea of picking up a project that was left incomplete and fulfilling a kind of filial duty. But in discussing the work with Carmen, I came to see it differently. There is, in fact, a profound rupture—an unbridgeable break, a gap between generations. That divide is a historical marker; it *is* history. The child Carmen, the Carmen who grew up after the dictatorship, is fundamentally divided

from, separated from, we could even say aborted from, the generation that came before. What is significant is that Carmen's film does not conclude with her fully grasping or inheriting the past. Instead, it ends with an act of imaginative reconstruction—she can now *imagine* the past, from a distance. As Carmen the narrator says, "I can *imagine* now what the wet concrete said..." Not I can hear, but I can imagine.

Category
Film, Modernism

Subject
Film, Architecture

Carmen Amengual is an interdisciplinary artist, independent researcher, and filmmaker from Argentina now based in Los Angeles. Her work explores the emergence of collective imaginaries, identity formations, and conceptions of time and history that shape political imagination. She has presented her projects in various formats, both nationally and internationally, with exhibitions at Artist Space (New York), Human Resources and 2220 Art & Archives (Los Angeles), Table (Chicago), Biquini Wax EPS (Mexico City), and Museo Centenario (Buenos Aires). Her work has been featured in conferences such as "Film Undone: Elements for a Latent Cinema" (Silent Green / Kino Arsenal, Berlin) and "Film Act: Third Cinema and Its Legacies" (American University in Cairo) and in screenings across the United States and abroad. *A Non-Coincidental Mirror* at Smack Mellon, Brooklyn, co-presented with the Vera List Center, is her first solo institutional exhibition in the US. Amengual studied Comparative Literature at the University of Buenos Aires and holds an MFA in Visual Arts from California Institute of the Arts. She is a 2021–22 Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Studio Program fellow, a 2022–24 Vera List Center for Art and Politics Fellow, a 2023 and 2024 Graham Foundation grantee, and a 2024 Creative Capital awardee. *A Non-Coincidental Mirror* was supported by a Foundation for Contemporary Arts emergency grant.

Soyoung Yoon is Director of Parsons Fine Arts MFA at Parsons School of Design and Assistant Professor of Art History & Visual Studies at Eugene Lang College of Liberal Arts, The New School. Yoon received her PhD from Stanford University and holds a BA from Seoul National University; she was also a Faculty at the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program (ISP) till 2023. Yoon's research offers a sustained inquiry into the politics of mobility and rhetorics of testimony, witnessing, and storytelling in relation to the moving image. Yoon is especially attentive to how art participates in capital's "expropriation of the senses": the creation of productive and unproductive bodies, of new capacities and incapacities of perception and experience. Yoon is currently in the process of

completing two monographs: *Walkie Talkie* on the rise of cinéma vérité amid anti-colonial struggles, new techniques of policing, and the new technological capacity for sync sound; and *TV Buddhas* on theories of suture and narrative, surveillance, and the body politic. A new book on the mattress as an artistic motif, *A Mattress is Not a Bed*, is in production.