

A Counter Aesthetic at Work

Lata Mani *in conversation with* C.S.Venkiteswaran

Lata Mani is a feminist historian, cultural critic, contemplative writer and filmmaker. She has published books and articles on a broad range of issues, from feminism and colonialism, to illness, spiritual philosophy and contemporary politics.

It was a wonderful and moving experience watching your films. Before we talk about your films, let us begin with you. You are a feminist historian, academic, writer and thinker. How did you stumble upon cinema?

• Like many things in life it was an accident. A very happy accident it turned out to be. A few years ago, I think 2012 - 2013, there was a small arts initiative in the city of Bangalore, Peaking Duck Network. Bangalore occupies a very particular place; it is not Delhi, it is not Bombay. Many interesting and experimental things happen there but they never seem to have the kind of impact as similar experiments in other cities; they tend to remain at a very local level. One should appreciate the fact that people in Bangalore collaborate and cooperate across disciplines, across media. The network invited me to facilitate a process involving artists, filmmakers and so on. One of the aspects of that initiative was something called Cross-Pollination Lab, where we invited people to work in a medium that they had never worked in and with someone they had never worked with before. Initially my job was just to facilitate but there was an issue of numbers, they were

one short. Nicolás (Grandi) said, "Listen, I'd love to do something with you, would you be open?" I said, "Sure!" I was just being game. We had a weekend to produce it. And Nocturne I and Nocturne II came out of that. And that really opened up things for me because it was very convergent with my own exploration. As someone who works with the word, I had been very struck by the fact that -and we would all agree - that we are living in a very instrumental time. Language is forensic. Language is like a tool with which you expose the world. The poetic nature of language, the reflective dimensions of language, the opening of new worlds through words, that seems to have retreated somewhat from our civic and public space, much to the detriment of political discourses, and the political discussions and conversations we are having.

So, Grandi came from a film making background?

• That's right, he studied Cinema in Buenos Aires and he happened to be in Bangalore for a five-year period teaching at the Srishti School of Art, Design & Technology. He was part of this group. He





was getting ready to go back to Buenos Aires when we started working. He had been interested in the poetic nature of the image and in whether it is possible for the image to retain a sense of mystery. So, there was a coming together of interests. And when we worked together we also found a rather remarkable kind of fluid reciprocity. Collaborations are not always easy; there are two people coming from different disciplinary backgrounds and then there is temperament and modes of working. We found ourselves completing each other's thoughts and a kind of mutual respect grew. That's how I ended up working with Nicolás. It's been an extraordinary journey.

True, one can see the romance with words from the way in which words are used in your films; it is really unconventional, especially in The Poetics of Fragility. You being an academician and writer, are used to dealing with words, but this process of imaging is totally different. So, how is it?

- It is very interesting actually. With the Nocturnes we had the visual assembly, and then the sutra proposed itself.

And the theme of the Nocturnes, did you select them?

- In my writing I have been trying to challenge a certain understanding of urbanism. There are so many aspects of the city that remain invisible to us. One aspect is nature in the city. Both Nocturnes were primarily shot in the city. In empty plots, in land available yet unoccupied by real estate. Part of my interest has been in how it is that we fail to see that which is already here and pulsating with life. Instead the city becomes the terrain on which an idea of the future is projected. And that idea has no respect for the past, no attention for the present. If you don't see what you are erasing, you have absolutely no idea of the effects and consequences of certain policies and decisions. You also are failing to see the richness of human experience. Cities are

places brought to life by the people who exist in them; not just people but all life forms, cats, dogs, crickets.

When you think of night life in the city the last thing that you think of is nature. So, the first *Nocturne* was built from the sounds I hear when I'm lying in bed, if I pay attention. What are the sounds in the city that we are somehow not paying attention to? *Nocturne II* was about the idea that there is something about contemporary life wherein it feels as though the thing in itself has very little value. We possess things for what they make of us. And one consequence of that is that the sensory richness, the conceptual richness, the cognitive richness, and the philosophical richness of what is intrinsic to life activity, to objects, to breathing, to being, to noticing, is overlooked. The city is often seen as a place where you merely accumulate experience. So, the second *Nocturne* starts with the declaration, Immanence is Plenitude (unlike in the first where the words form a sentence only at the end). That which is intrinsic, that which inheres, that is where fullness and richness are found. Something about contemporary secular and political discourse doesn't acknowledge that.

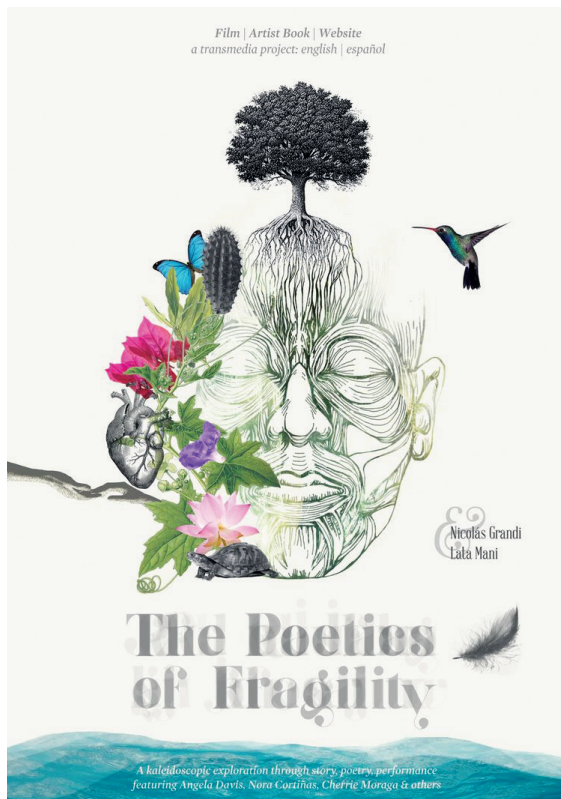
I have been very fascinated by your depiction of Bangalore city in your book The Integral Nature of Things where you talk about the

differences between a street and a road, street as a much more organic and human, while road is a very instrumental passage. So, in the film, you are trying to convey something abstract in the context of something very concrete and visceral. How do you grapple with this, do you think up images and then go for the text or do you have the text in mind and then go for the images?

- It varies. *Here Now* was a poem that I had written well before I met Nicolás. He said, let me use something you've written to work on the poetic image. He shot that videopoem with an existing text. The *De Sidere 7* film was interesting. He was getting ready to go back to Buenos Aires. I'd always wanted to make a film on desire, and it turned that he did as well. We thought, why not? We invited performance artists, actors and story tellers from Bangalore to respond to the question, "What does desire mean to you?" And each of them came back with a proposal. We didn't want to mess with their proposal but we worked with it, tweaked it a bit and we shot. So now we had this material that we had to do something with! Ananya and the wise one was a track that I wrote in order to provide the loose weave frame for these performances, to build a whole from them.

One of the things that I have been working on in my own writing is using multiple genres; poetry, analytical prose,

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The most recent film, *The Poetics of Fragility*, has a very political dimension. The film is ostensibly about fragility in nature and fragility of bodies.

It was shot in the San Francisco Bay Area where I lived for 25 years. It is a very interesting place. In the film even though we were focusing on fragility in nature and of the body, we also wanted to introduce the idea of political fragility. And we do that by using very well-known political activists.

observational prose, straight-up academic analysis. What that does to the reader is that s/he is moving constantly back and forth. Each kind of writing requires a different kind of engagement. We can bring attention to how we are present to what we are experiencing. I think we can all agree that we are living in a time when the problem is not lack of information. The problem is that it simply doesn't seem to matter that you know. You have the information but it seems to make no difference. So how do you open people to feeling, to feelings other than rage, frustration, and fed-upness? There is a range in human emotion. If you look at the traditional ways in which one understood *rasa* and *bhava* there is an enormous variety. But if you look at contemporary culture, if you look at television or cinema, the range of emotions is fairly narrow. How do we

bring sensory depth? How do we return to noticing that which is subtle in the affective register and that which is subtle in the cognitive and philosophical register? One way you can do that is to employ the extraordinary sensory fullness offered by cinema, the visual medium. It does things that the text simply cannot.

I liked the way you introduced the film asking the viewers to watch with their body, not just the eyes and ears.

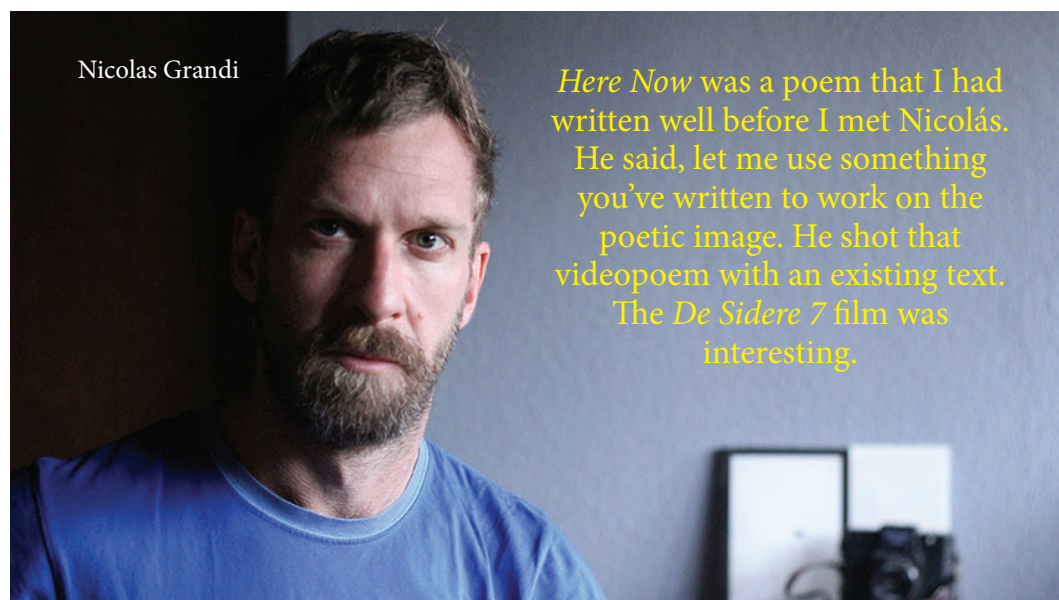
- The challenge is how you take advantage of that plenitude without immersing the spectator so totally that they are not able to step back and reflect on what they've seen. The phrase I use to describe our approach is 'an aesthetic of intimate remove.' You draw people into the work, inviting them to be fully present but you

move back and forth between abstraction and narrativity. Between going closer and moving farther, zooming in and zooming out as it were, both at the level of the image and of the ideas in the film. So, that's how it is conceived. We were also experimenting with the thought of a portrait of an idea. How would you make a portrait of an idea? How do you allow an idea to unfold and reveal itself? Not hit the audience over their heads but respect them.

People left to themselves are thinking beings. But never are they addressed as thinking beings. What does it mean to use cinema as a tool of thought or philosophy and how could you position the viewer in such a way that they see it as an invitation? Partly you do that by moving between narrativity and abstraction and mixing visual treatments. For example, there is a segment in *De Sidere 7*, which is really a homage to the Indian responses to Italian neo-realism, the black and white sequences. These varying visual treatments, these choices, enable a kind of excavation that allows room for the image to breathe, the

idea to breathe, and for people to breathe. As soon as we breathe, we are in our bodies; and as soon as we are in our bodies, we apprehend the world in a very different way.

That's very interesting. The kind of film that you are making, the thought process is entirely different from the documentaries we are used to. In the Indian documentary context, especially after its resurgence after Emergency, there was always this obsession with social issues and problems relating to gender, justice, environment, human rights etc., where the documentary is talking back to the state, arguing for certain ideological positions; you will find a huge majority of our films falling under those categories. Then there are also another set of works based on art, artists, culture, classical and folk performance traditions etc. But the kind of films that you are trying to make stands apart in the sense that here, the documentary itself is thinking, it enables a different kind of thinking and feeling in the viewer, it goes beyond representation, and demands a different kind and quality of attention from the viewer. One



Nicolas Grandi

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of methods you adopt is duration, the way you hold a shot and when you hold a shot you are thrown back to yourselves, the image is no longer going to tell you anything, you have to read into it, or you have to open yourself out to that image. Were you working with and through the element of time?

- Very much working with time. Time, form, structure – these are the three things that I in my writing, and we in our films, are very consciously working with. Time is particularly important. Especially now, in the last 10-15 years, when we are living in a media-saturated environment. Knowledge has become conflated with information. Information is not knowledge, information is information. There is an expectation on the part of the viewer that you will inform and educate. I would not say that these films don't inform or educate, but they take a very different approach. They invite you to reflect and time is crucial for that because our subjection as citizen-subjects to the logic of

capital is secured through relentless distraction, the relentlessly increasing demand on us as laborers, as consumers. It's almost as if there is a conspiracy to prevent us from drawing breath.

The only way you can get people to drop beneath the level of habitual perception is to stay long enough. As you say, when you look at the image and you are expecting the image to change, if you hold it long enough you become simultaneously conscious both of what you would normally think, and you become aware of the things that you are feeling that you would not otherwise have time to think about. A very old contemplative practice – the camera as witness. In many important social justice documentaries also the camera is a witness. I would say that in many ways the kind of work that we are doing takes for granted the existence of a strong tradition of realist documentary, Deepa Dhanraj, Anand Patwardhan etc. There are a tremendous number of stories

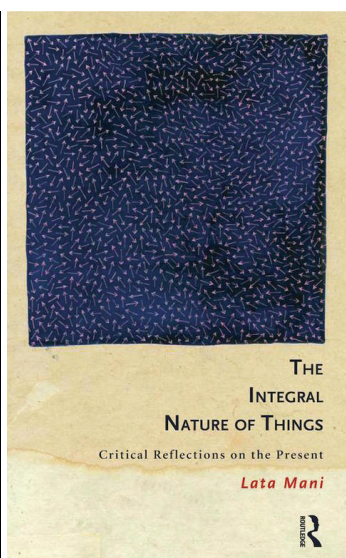
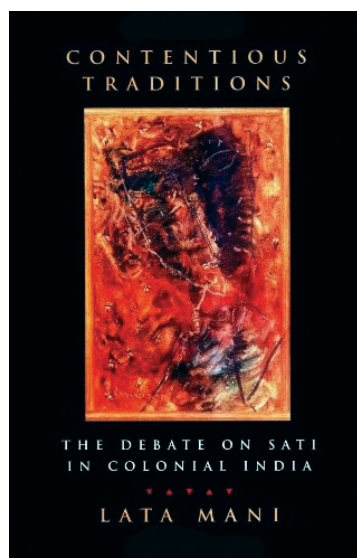
that need to be told. But there are certain stories that would not find expression if we were to only draw on the lexicon of contemporary political discourse. I would say our project is complementary to such films. It demands something different from the viewer but I don't see them as opposed. I see them as distinct.

That's very interesting, this idea of being complementary rather than oppositional, an idea and approach that is very important and crucial to the times we live in. Let me come back to the issue of the quality of attention. As you said, we are living in a time of digital excess, and It is very difficult to get the viewer to pause and reflect, as he/she is used to this endless torrent of images and information. So that makes this a sort of counter aesthetic at work, forcing the viewer to sit back and contemplate.

- Yes. It is absolutely important to address people as existential beings. Fundamentally almost everyone is trying to find out, discover for themselves, the meaning of life. It could be through the political register, it could be through the philosophical register or it could be through

the intellectual register. But that is the question that connects everybody. The most recent film, *The Poetics of Fragility*, has a very political dimension. The film is ostensibly about fragility in nature and fragility of bodies. It was shot in the San Francisco Bay Area where I lived for 25 years. It is a very interesting place. It's on the edge of the Pacific, it's the western-most point. But it looks towards the East, and almost all the traditions from the East have come there. It's also a place where some of the binaries that you find in our political discourses have been continually challenged: body/mind, spirit/matter, individual/collective, personal/political, biographical/sociological etc. by political movements that flourished there, like black power, farmworker struggles, feminism, anti-war, anti-globalization etc. So in that film even though we were focusing on fragility in nature and of the body, we also wanted to introduce the idea of political fragility. And we do that by using very well-known political activists.

The film opens with Angela Davis. You do not expect Angela Davis to say 'A strong woman is sometimes strongly fed up.' She does not usually speak in that personal





register so there is a kind of disjunction immediately. You are reading what she is saying, reading her performance, in two different registers. The second person in the film is Cherrie Moraga, a very well known, poet, playwright, political theorist, who also speaks in an intensely personal register. It makes sense because she articulated in the 1980s something called Theory in the Flesh, which was a kind of eruption in the black-white theorizing landscape in the United States of an intersectional women of color feminism that included Native, Latina, Asian and Black women in the US. The third person in the film is Nora Cortiñas, one of the founders of the 'Mothers of the Disappeared' in Argentina. When this film was shown in Argentina, it was seen as a political film. Nora wears her son's photograph around her neck and when she speaks of impermanence, the shock of discovering impermanence, it immediately activates all these things.

If you are working with the idea of the poetic image, it opens the possibility of a

plurality of references, a plurality of meanings. How do we bring together the idea of the poetic image, language as poetry, and the idea that the personal is political in a discussion of fragility which though it focuses on the bodily and naturalistic continually gesturing to its political and social nature? Fragility is a form of precarity or vulnerability. Precarity or vulnerability has more to do with social arrangements that put the people in certain structural positions so as to experience discrimination, weakness, or marginality. Fragility is natural. Things are born, they mature, they live, they die; that is fragility. So in that tension also, we are looking at the tension between that which is natural and that which is social.

We will pursue this point further in a moment. Before that I would like to come back to your life and the accident you met with which was a rupture in your thought processes and a turning point in your life. It not only affected you physically but also radically changed the way you looked at life, and in turn your philosophy of life. Would you mind telling us

about it?

● Sure. I suffered a brain injury on my way to work. I was teaching at the University of California, Davis then. I was hit by a suicidal young man, who was unemployed and felt he could never get a job. He stole a Pepsi cola truck. It was a huge truck full of cans, bottles and he was speeding at over 100 miles an hour. I was going at 55 miles, the speed limit. Suddenly I see in my rearview mirror highway patrol cars with their lights on. The convention is to move out of the way if you see them. But I didn't realize that I was moving into the path of the person they were chasing. He hit me. I was thrown from one side of the freeway across several lanes to the other side. I was astonished that I was alive at that point. But that was the beginning of a very long period of illness, which is still not over. I still live with the long-term effects of the injury. But what it did was, it completely unplugged me. All the things that I had been used to – being able to think, speak, read, compute, recall – everything was gone.

It was in the silence of the injury that I

began to be aware of something other than the cognitive mind of which I had been conscious. I was seeing, feeling, experiencing things for which I had no language. It put me in touch with what meditators discover for themselves, that there is a witnessing consciousness that is separate yet deeply, intimately connected to the embodied self. And very gradually over the years, some of my capacities came back. But in that time, I became extremely aware of perception as processual. Usually, everything gets foreshortened. I look across and I see a young woman as a young woman. But the process through which I recognize her as a woman, as a young woman, as a young woman of a certain social class or aesthetic preference etc., is not something we are consciously aware of. Everything seems to be seamlessly happening. When that capacity is taken away, and comes back little by little by little, the architecture of how you see is revealed to you.

I don't recommend a brain injury to anyone (laughs), it was extremely painful and it is still very challenging, but it has been



a kind of gift. I still can't read easily and writing is still difficult for me. But before we had writing we had listening; we learned through our ears. That realization opened up the idea of cognizing, what it means to understand. How do I understand? As an academic mainly through my eyes and through reading. But there are other ways of understanding, there are other ways to listen, there are other things to notice. When I came out of this accident, many of my Marxist friends said, "It's good that you took up this meditation business to get through but how does it change the way you look at the world and the way you analyze what is happening in the social world?"

The social world may have retreated during the time of my illness but it never ceased to engage me. That's when I wrote the book *Sacred Secular*, which looked at two things that had happened to India while I was ill: Hindutva and neo-liberal globalization. That's how that book came to be written. That's how I got interested in issues of perception and the body as a site of intelligence. The body is not just an instrument, it is an incredible site of intelligence. We have forgotten how to pay attention to the intelligence of the heart, intelligence of the body, intelligence of the mind – if you pay attention to them, hear them, marshal them, it is entirely possible to rediscover the world anew, afresh. The exhaustion that many of us tend to experience, I think, is because we are viewing and experiencing the world in ways that are narrower and narrower, and more and more unidimensional. Anything that opens us out – art, philosophy, poetry, nature – is extremely important.

So you came to film also at the same time?

● That was in the last five years, after I finished my book *The Integral Nature of Things*. That's when I met Nicolás Grandi

and started making films. Prior to that I did make a small film about my mother, *Leela's Journey*. The film was made on a hand-held flip video. My mother had Parkinson's. She was remarkably honest about her experience. I shot it myself and she was very comfortable with me. That was more of a straight forward, personal documentary. But this set of explorations of the poetic image, using cinema as a tool for philosophy, is an extension of my collaboration with Nicolás.

Was it a natural extension of your writing, of expressing ideas through imaging?

● Yes, in the sense of how to experience an idea as opposed to my telling you what the idea is, how to create the conditions so you can experience it as a reader, as a viewer.

*Your accident and the subsequent encounters with the divine had a deep impact on your thinking and writing. Your last book is titled *The Tantra Chronicles*. It would be difficult for the academic community to accept it. Armed with such insights and experiences, how does one engage with the secular traditions of academic writing and thinking? On the other side, you have the new political dispensation that propagates a certain kind of spirituality and religion that is monolithic and doesn't allow any kind of plurality or debate. So how do your ideas intend to engage with both these histories? Also, don't you run the risk of being branded as anti-secular or Hindutva?*

● You would have to work pretty hard to brand my work 'Hindutva'. You would have to misread it. It doesn't mean people won't. People have been bemused and bewildered by the direction that my thinking has taken. But I think that comes from what I call 'secular superstition' regarding faith traditions. We are so afraid of our own traditions because we have allowed a hyper-modern, masculinist, ultra-nationalist,



Angela Davis in *The Poetics of Fragility*

nonsensical, and retrogressive interpretation of our extremely complex and subtle traditions to stand for tradition itself. As far as the Left is concerned, tradition is only constraint. We really need to rethink that. Because tradition is also potentiality. No tradition is inertly lying there. Philosophers, artists, thinkers in all the centuries that have preceded us have critically engaged with tradition. Why do we think that it is only with modern education that any kind of criticality is possible? I think we're cutting the ground from under our feet. Now, these are matters of personal inclination. I don't think that the contemplative or the reflective is necessarily something that everyone is interested in. But to assume that an entire tradition has nothing to say to the present is tragic. It is to cede the entire tradition to Hindutva forces. It is because of this that we haven't developed thought or language adequate enough to challenge the BJP and the Hindutva forces.

It's not possible to go head-to-head with people who have no interest in listening to you. I don't even go head-to-head with

secularists. What I do is to stand aside and speak the truth, and all I mean by 'truth' is my provisional understanding which I'm aware is continually evolving. There is no truth that is finally arrived at, these are all enquiries. My work represents the provisional synthesis that I can offer at this moment in my journey. And I choose things that are non-polemical as ways of exploring. For example, desire. It is at the very heart of the current aspirational economy, at the same time religion is terrorized by desire. Secularists, contemporary consumerist culture elevate desire, but narrow it, commoditize it, instrumentalize it. How might we rethink desire? My method is to take an idea, stand to the side of the ways in which people are talking about it, and find a fresh language for it even while engaging with what is being said. That has been the attempt. Going head-to-head means that you spend so much time challenging everyone else's premises that there's not enough time left to say what really needs to be said. That was also my approach in *Sacred Secular*: moving between analysis

THE TANTRA CHRONICLES
Original Teachings from Devi, Shiva, Jesus, Mary, Moon

Received by Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani



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of secularism, analysis of urban India and how to rethink faith.

My intellectual lexicon is still deeply informed by the crucial categories that Marxism provides. There is no question of throwing them out. However, there is the question of expanding its vocabulary. There are limits beyond which such transcoding is not possible. Still, you can push the limits. My way has been to speak unapologetically, unabashedly about my journey and try to find a language that is authentic to that journey, that enquiry. Not spend all my time justifying myself and convincing others that I am a good person and really care about social justice. You can't do that, your conduct has to persuade, mere statements are pointless.

Your position is very important especially in our times, when any kind of difference is seen as opposition. We don't seem to understand that there are non-positional differences. It is

as if anything different from your opinion or ideology is against you. Your ideas and your filmmaking mode is radically different, and their whole point is in being open to one's own experiences, and being ready to share it in your own language. It also requires a kind of social-media circumstances to sustain such dialogues. Do you think those spaces where one engages with oneself and others, are shrinking, in our times?

• That's a very interesting question. Actually, you are probably in a better position to answer that than me. All I can say is that we should all fight for it together. It was interesting for me to see the links, the connections, the echoes and the resonances across screenings in different locations. *The Poetics of Fragility* particularly. The film is 63 minutes but the discussions have gone for an hour and a half, in the US, Europe, Latin America and here. Something about the concept of fragility is really speaking to people. When we made the film, I thought

well maybe older people or sick people or ill people might respond to this film, but actually the most passionate responses come from young people. It is not surprising when you start to think about it because climate change is a reality for the younger generation. They can see the environment collapsing and transforming right in front of them. The future is uncertain from the point of view of climate, the future is uncertain from the point of view of economics, jobs and so on, creating economic insecurity and also psychological fragility. And psychological fragility is also connected to our social media environment where we are aware of everything anyone is doing. Previously you might have compared yourself with others in your village or town or cohort or maybe in your group of friends. Now you can compare yourself with the entire world and find yourself wanting.

But, again, to draw on a Marxist idea: contradiction. The very conditions that produce a certain tendency also produce a counter tendency. And so it is, I think, that there is a deep hunger for depth. There's a hunger for conversation but that cannot happen on social media because of its nature. I think that it is no accident that regardless of which part of the world we are in *The Poetics of Fragility* has provoked such an extensive discussion. Building on that discussion we are now moving into installations, art works and other video projects. I think there isn't enough space for conversation. I think that certainly on the Left there is complete terror that anything could be manipulated. I think we should be confident of our ideas. I think we should be able to stand for them, stand by them and if we cannot fearlessly debate each other, then I do not know with whom we can have a conversation. Regardless of which part of the world you are in, the Left is in retreat. I'm not saying we caused this but I am

saying we are not helping.

There's a recent book by the title, "A Severe Head Injury Made Me A Mathematician" written by someone who went through a similar experience of brain injury. The injury changed his perspective too. Are there any parallels?

- It has made me greatly introspective. It has made me extremely aware of the importance of a small detail and a humble gesture, the kinds of things we tend to overlook. When you are unable, you look at time and space slowly; it's the small thing that comes forward and claims your attention and it is magical!

What is your take on the idea that we are living in a post-truth world?

- I don't know what post-truth is. We all know that truth is complexly constructed, socially constructed, historically contingent, and it can be understood, restored, analyzed. In the kind of thinking that currently predominates, it is only the present that matters. The past is rubble, the future is utopian. But it's a fantasy that we can somehow rocket ourselves into the future and leave all this behind. To me, past, present, and future, are continually present in every single moment as potential. To embrace this idea, that you can somehow slice up time, that we live only in this 'now' and only this 'now' matters, is to willingly become a slave to the driving logic of the present.

For readers to browse her works:

<http://www.latamani.com/films/>

<http://www.thepoeticsoffragility.com/>

NB: This transcript has been copyedited for clarity

Transcribed by **Anand S**