

A FILM BY  
SILVIA MAGGI

# HELLI & TOMMY



# INTRODUCTION

This film is based on the discovery of some photos at a flea market, portraying a lesbian party in East Berlin, in 1970. None of the people in these photos had a name, except “Helli”, whose name was on the back of every photo featuring this brown-haired girl.

The pictures were kept for years in the director's drawer of “the important things”, and these women had become her drunken chosen ancestors, bound to her by queerness. Several years later, by chance or synchronicity, director Silvia Maggi bumped into a tomb at the Alten St. Matthäus cemetery in Berlin and -for chance or synchronicity- the person in the grave was one of the women depicted in the photos.

She later found out that the pictures had been taken by Tommy (born Rita Thomas), an amateur lesbian photographer based in East Berlin. Tommy had died at the age of 87, in the same year in which Maggi found her photos at the flea market. Helli, though, was still alive and living in the city. In April 2020, the director meets Helli to return those memories that belonged to her, those precious photos of a party where, at the age of 40, they were captured dancing and happy. This encounter was the beginning of the friendship between the two of them and the opening of a journey in the lives of a group of dissident lesbians who, through parties and secret dances, survived a regime that wanted them to be invisible, in East Berlin during the time of the wall.

Tommy and Helli were together as a polyamorous couple for 50 years, had a large group of gender non-conforming friends and documented their lives, parties and love affairs through 50 years of photo archives. The sexual, sensual and hedonist content of it, is an antidote to the invisibilization and care-only narratives that permeate lesbian history.

The movie *Helli & Tommy* is, above all, an ode to synchronicity, chaos, and coincidences, which connect us all like a red thread. It is a bridge between the past and the present, the world of the living and the world of the dead, a tribute to the humble legacies of queer people, yet so rich in meaning and emotional strength. The film seeks to capture the complexity of representing bodies that have historically lacked agency. Marginalized people typically only appear in history when their lives intersect with power, but in this case, Tommy allows herself and her friends to exist and endure their time throughout her pictures, continuing to resonate in the present.



# FORMAT

*Helli & Tommy* offers an opportunity to explore complex themes of perception, reality, history and identity within the framework of an hybrid documentary: this work creates a mental “short-circuit” of reality and fiction, death and life, past and present.

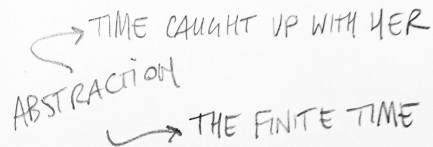
**Documentary Segments (Digital + Archive material):** The documentary segments of the film employ a digital format and archive material, a choice rooted in the format's ability to capture reality with precision, clarity, and immediacy. This format supports the film's commitment to documenting real events, conversations, people, and environments, offering a sense of authenticity and direct engagement with the subject matter. The director although perceived as a presence and voice throughout the entire documentary part, is seen only in the final scene.

**Fiction Segments (16mm Film):** In contrast, the fiction segments are shot on 16mm film. This is the place where Tommy exists in the movie and it is a deliberate artistic choice that evokes a sense of nostalgia, texture, and timelessness. The grainy, tactile quality of 16mm film creates a visual aesthetic that is both dreamlike and evocative, enhancing the fictional elements of the narrative.

**Hybrid Format:** The juxtaposition of these two formats serves to reinforce the thematic duality at the heart of the film. This approach allows the film to explore the intersection of the real and the surreal, reflecting how extraordinary elements can be interwoven with the fabric of everyday life. The contrast in formats also encourages the audience to question the nature of reality and to consider the ways in which perception can be shaped by both the medium and the message. By using 16mm for the fictional elements and digital for the documentary parts, the film not only differentiates these two narrative layers but also creates a dialogue between them, enhancing the overall viewing experience and deepening the thematic resonance of the story.

*Helli & Tommy* is a powerful cinematic experience that make people fall in love with its characters and at the same time make them reflect on life and the connections between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

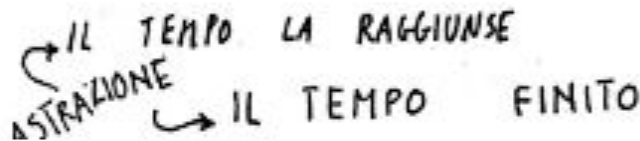
# INSPIRATION



TIME CAUGHT UP WITH HER  
ABSTRACTION  
THE FINITE TIME

Patrizia Vicinelli

from “Non sempre ricordano”/ “Not always they remember”



IL TEMPO LA RAGGIUNSE  
ASTRAZIONE  
IL TEMPO FINITO

Helli & Tommy is a hybrid fiction and documentary film, where the intimate and the historical intertwine.

The film follows the director in her fragmented and almost magical search for Tommy, a lesbian figure from divided Berlin, whose life remains in hidden archives, scattered memories, and objects imbued with presence.

The story evolves in three moments, inspired by Patrizia Vicinelli's poem: “Time caught up with her. Abstraction. The finite time”.

**PART 1: “Time caught up with her”** opens in a dreamlike 16mm sequence, where Tommy emerges from the fog of a night market. Amid abandoned objects, the director encounters her. This impossible meeting sets the tone: a liminal space where living and dead cross paths, where time fractures and dissolves.

**PART 2: “Abstraction”** shifts to documentary. Silvia and the crew curate an exhibition with Tommy's belongings, retrieved from her last basement. A passionate collector, Tommy also documented queer life and the clandestine parties she hosted during the Wall years. Her surviving friends revisit the objects and memories, sparking an intimate debate on archives and the ethics of representing the dead.

**PART 3: “The finite time”** merges fiction and documentary, depicting the finissage of the exhibition as both celebration and revival of Tommy's parties. Friends, filmcrew, and younger queers gather at Ballhaus Mitte, once a lesbian meeting place in East Berlin. The 16mm film bridges living and dead, coexisting unseen yet sensed. Tommy too dances beyond the veil.



# DETAILS

Duration: 80 minutes.

**PART 1 (*Time caught up with her*):** Fiction - 16mm, duration 5-7 minutes

**PART 2 (*Abstraction*):** Documentary - Digital + archive material, duration 65 minutes

**PART 3 (*The finite time*):** Fiction and documentary - 16mm + Digital, duration 7-10 minutes



# TOMMY

**TOMMY (archive material and fictional character):** She passes away in 2018 and is along with Helli the main protagonist of this work. An amateur photographer with a thousand jobs (hairdresser for movie dogs, ticket-taker at carousels, street vendor, plastic collector). She managed to keep her group of queer friends together during the GDR by organizing illegal parties and gatherings in her house used as a speakeasy.

Tommy called herself a “bubi,” a word that described butch lesbians in East Berlin. Tommy loved being the center of attention, photographing and being photographed. She had an obsession with archives “this will be necessary for the future”, she used to say. That resulted in a repertoire of more than 400 analog photos and super8 films depicting the life of her group of friends during the GDR. The main theme of Tommy's photos were parties, a political act of rebellion against a system that wanted a modest, heterosexual lifestyle.

She was also a collector of objects and had more than 20 basements in Berlin, where she stored all kinds of items, reflecting an obsessive interest in archiving; in fact, she described her basements as ‘small museums of rebellion.’

Tommy has always been with many women and openly polyamorous but the love of her life, her primary relationship has always been Helli, from when they were 16 years old to when she passed away. The film aims to create a portrait of Tommy through the stories of her friends and people who loved her.

The space where she lives in the movie is in the 16mm film and its grain. There, Tommy, as a fictional character, exists in the world of the dead, shaping her reality.



# HELLI

**HELLI:** Tommy's lifelong partner. Born in 1932, she lives in Friedrichshain-Berlin with her sister. Helli was working with Tommy being an hairdresser at the dogs salon in Thaeistr. 42. She was admired by all as a beautiful woman, with a charm equal to a movie actress, also elusive and therefore dreamed of by many of the women who gravitated around her and Tommy. Helli was a "Mauschen," a term describing the sexy, made-up, perfumed female lesbians, as Tommy tells it in an interview. Helli was always the quieter and more introverted part of the couple. While Tommy made connections and put her face into organizing and attending events, Helli managed the backstage. Their gay friends, new to cross-dressing, were inspired by her for class and elegance. Helli remains in the shadows, even in this film. But from behind the scenes, she tells us the anecdotes, the places and the atmosphere of those years in East-Berlin.







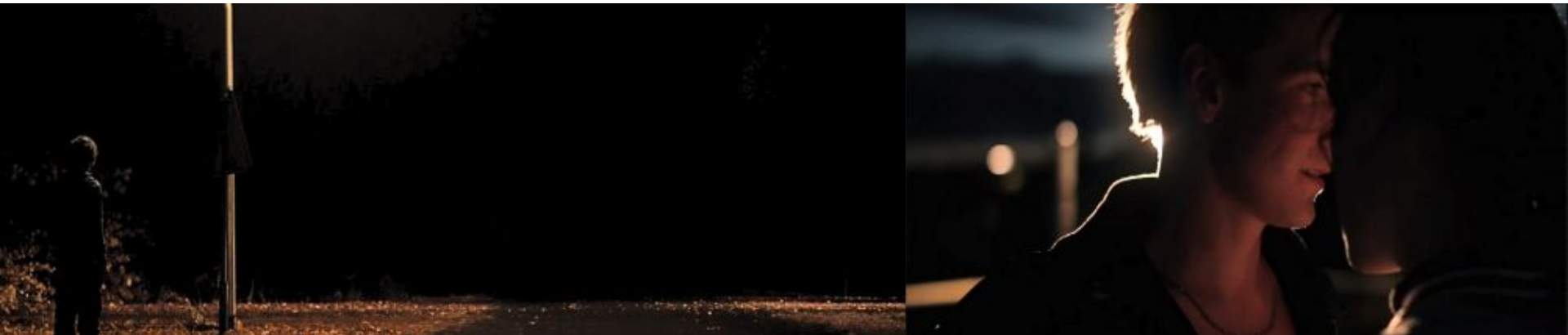
"[T]here exists an allegiance between the dead and the unborn of which we the living are merely the ligature."

Robert Pogue Harrison,  
"The Dominion of the Dead"



# PART 1

16 mm - color



The film opens on a black screen, with text: "Part 1: Time caught up with her." The screen slowly lights up with a bluish haze that envelops an empty night market. The camera drifts like a specter among silent stalls: antique clocks, broken dolls, tarnished mirrors. Each object glimmers under dim lights, as if guarding secrets of the past.

Amid this setting, footsteps are heard. It is Tommy, a figure blending elegance and wear. She wears a long coat; her walk is confident yet melancholic. She searches for her dog Flora, calling her name in German. Her voice reverberates, trapped in the mist. Suddenly, a female voice answers in Italian: Silvia.

The encounter feels inevitable. They smoke, drink from a small bottle of vodka, and confess. Tommy speaks with irony about the exhaustion of her aging body, unable to endure nights of parties and lovers. Silvia responds with vulnerability, admitting she feels lost, with no points of reference or genealogies to sustain her. The conversation, shot on 16mm with visible grain, takes on a dreamlike tone: two solitudes recognizing each other in a suspended time.

Flora's bark leads them to an old Gaststätte, a pre-war dance hall. The building seems suspended in darkness, as if existing in limbo. Tommy hesitates before entering. She places some old photographs on the ground and gazes at the red moon rising in the sky. A silent, almost ritual gesture, before vanishing into the shadows.

# PART 2

Digital + Archival material - color and B&W



Silvia explores Tommy's hidden archives across Berlin, accompanied by Karl-Heinz. They discuss Tommy's more than fifteen basements, rented under various names. Karl-Heinz describes Tommy not as a hoarder but as a clandestine archivist, preserving queer memory under threat of erasure.

Descending into a dusty basement, Silvia and Karl-Heinz move like archaeologists through crowded boxes and objects: postcards, tools, photographs, and carefully folded dresses. Silvia finds a photograph of Tommy laughing with Helli, at one of their illegal parties and the emotional weight of the discovery sparks a reflection on the ethics of revealing such intimate traces.

In a Berlin gallery, the team carefully arranges Tommy's belongings: worn lamps, postcards, ribbons from the Hunde Salon Dixi, place that she run for over two decades. When Helli and Tommy's friends arrive, the exhibition transforms into a living ritual of memory. They touch, recall, and share stories, blending past and present.

The narrative culminates at the Ballhaus Mitte, a historic queer refuge, place chosen for the finissage party of the exhibition. Light filters through tattered curtains, parquet creaks, and mirrors reflect traces of secret histories. The space becomes a living memory, honoring Tommy's life and the fragile continuity between past and present, the living and the dead.

# PART 3

16 mm/ Digital- color



The film culminates at the Ballhaus Mitte, which bursts into life with colored lights and a soundtrack blending disco, punk, and cabaret. The filmcrew, old friends and young queer attendees share the dance floor, moving together as Tommy's photographs are projected onto translucent curtains, merging with the shadows of the present. Laughter, tears, embraces, and conversations interrupted by music fill the space, creating the sensation of a present expanded beyond ordinary time. The camera lingers on moments of tenderness and abandon: sustained glances, hands reaching for one another, impromptu toasts. The atmosphere is both celebratory and deeply imbued with memory.

Suddenly, the grainy texture of 16mm transforms the scene, and Tommy appears: silent and unseen by the others, yet profoundly present. She observes, sits, and even dances with a young woman in her realm, blurring the line between the real and the spectral. In this liminal space, the living and the dead coexist, sharing the room without fully perceiving one another. Time itself seems to dissolve, and the veil between worlds becomes almost tangible.

The final moments focus on Tommy smiling, resting her head on her dance partner's shoulder, while generations intermingle around her—hugs, laughter, tears. Helli smiles too, witnessing the continuity of memory and presence. There is no farewell, only a persistent sense of connection. The film closes with the sensation that queer memory, resilient and luminous, endures in gestures, glances, and the shared rhythm of celebration, keeping Tommy's spirit alive in the spaces she once inhabited.





Tommy and Helli  
Berlin-Weissensee, 1957



Helli and Tommy.  
Berlin-Friedrichshain, 1968



## AUTOR/ DIRECTOR'S NOTE

I met Tommy after she had already died, through photographs she took in 1970 that I found by chance at a flea market.

I encountered her again in a cemetery, when I accidentally came across the grave of a friend of hers who appeared in those same photos. Years later, I crossed paths with her once more while buying a leather bag at another market: inside, I found a portrait of her, among objects she was selling at a stall.

I found her again in the thesis of a historian writing about lesbians during the years of the Berlin Wall.

There are so many coincidences that connect me to this person. For a long time, I wondered whether Tommy had been searching for me and had, in some way, found me. Or whether it was I who was seeking her, in order to find myself.

Now, when I ask myself if it is right to share her story, to reveal all her belongings, her lovers, her letters, and the fines she left behind, I surrender to intuition and to that irrational feeling that I can connect with her and hear what she would have wanted.

This film is an attempt to reconstruct Tommy's story. Through the eyes and voices of those who loved her, through her hopes, failures, and achievements—which are probably one and the same—through the photos she took, through her presence in the objects I find by chance or through synchronicity, and through the cryptic intuitions I still feel while making this film. I will do my best to respect Tommy's image and legacy.

I believe there is a very thin veil separating the world of the living from that of the dead. Occasionally, one has the privilege of glimpsing through it, and I believe it must be approached with care and delicacy, like a whisper.



## CAMERA APPROACH

The film employs a fluid and intimate camera style, shifting between different visual textures to enhance the narrative's transitions between magical realism, documentary, and fiction. In the first and third parts, the camera often uses handheld shots with soft focus and slight motion blur, capturing the dreamlike quality of the scenes. These sequences are shot on 16mm film, which adds a nostalgic, grainy texture, enhancing the ethereal and timeless atmosphere. The camera frequently lingers on details—Tommy's hands, the fox in the bushes, the moon—inviting the viewer to immerse in the characters' internal worlds.

In the documentary part, the camera takes on a more observational, yet still personal, approach. It often mirrors the director's perspective, using steady shots and smooth tracking movements to follow her through Berlin's vibrant streets. The digital format here is clear, contrasting with the earlier 16mm footage, emphasizing the shift to a contemporary and grounded reality.



## SOUND DESIGN

The sound design is integral to the film's atmosphere, blending ambient sounds with music to create a rich auditory experience.

In the magical realism sections, sound is used to heighten the surreal quality—footsteps echo slightly off-sync, the rustling of the fox is subtly amplified, and the live music from the dance hall drifts in and out, creating a sense of timelessness. These scenes are underscored by a minimalist, haunting score that melds with natural sounds, reinforcing the otherworldly mood.

In the documentary-fiction segment, the sound becomes more diegetic and grounded. The hum of the city, conversations in the marketplace, and the techno beats from a nearby party anchor the viewer in the present. However, subtle sound bridges are used to link the different time periods, such as the blending of the German chanson with the techno music, creating a sense of continuity and connection between past and present.



# KEY CREATIVES



**DIRECTOR: Silvia Maggi** is an Italian author, artist and filmmaker based in Berlin. She directed the documentaries: Valery Alexanderplatz (Italy/Germany 2024), Innen heraus (Italy/Germany 2024), 26 de Diciembre (Germany/Spain 2017), and Welcome Home (Italy/Germany 2013) Her work has been screened at festivals and conferences including Films des Femmes (Créteil, FR), Schwules Museum (Berlin, DE), the Royal Accademy University (London,UK), Universidad OMinho (Lisboa, PT), Festival del cinema Italiano in Milan (Cineteca Oberdan, Milan, Italy), Festival del cinema italiano (Rovinj, Croatia) among others. Her latest works Innen heraus won the Triveneto award at the Lago film festival 2024 and Valery Alexanderplatz won Best director at the Berlin Indie Film Festival 2024. As a video artist she screened works at MIX Festival (New York, USA), Yermilov gallery (Khrkov, Ukraine), Mirror Art Gallery (Vicenza, Italy), Neomudejar Avant-garde museum (Madrid, Spain), Radialsystem (Berlin, Germany) . [www.silviamaggi.com](http://www.silviamaggi.com)

**D.O.P.: Smina Bluth** (born in Wuppertal, Germany 1980) is a freelance DoP. She creates cinematography for art and experimental Film productions, documentary, feature films and commercial productions. Smina graduated from Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen, Potsdam in 2011 (Diploma). In 2010 she was nominated „best cinematography“ at IFFF Dortmund Cologne for her work as DoP for "The Multitude Is Feverish" by Vika Kirchenbauer. „Shift“ by Alex Gerbaulet wins the main prize of German Competition at International Short Film Festival Oberhausen 2015 and the German Film Criticism Prize 2015. Smina is part of CINEMATOGRAPHINNEN – WOMEN CINEMATOGRAPHERS NETWORK. Since 2018 she is a Tutor at MET FILMSCHOOL Berlin. [www.sminabluth.de](http://www.sminabluth.de)



# KEY CREATIVES

**EDITING:** **Sofia Angelina Machado aka SAM**, graduated from the prestigious Universidad del Cine in Buenos Aires and went on to complete a Master's degree at the Film University Babelsberg Konrad Wolf, specializing in editing.

She has experience in editing feature films, documentaries, series and experimental short films. Particularly noteworthy is her work on the documentary series "Juan Carlos: Love, Money and Betrayal", which earned her a nomination for the German Television Award in 2023 in the category "Best Editing/Montage Information/Documentary". Also in 2023, the short film "Die Brautentführung", in which she was involved, received the prestigious "Best International Fiction Award" at the Sundance Film Festival.

Her work has been screened at various international festivals such as the Berlinale, Sundance Film Festival, San Francisco, Dok Leipzig, Ann Arbor, Cannes, Guanajuato, Thessaloniki, Dok Aviv and many others. <https://sofiaaama.wordpress.com/>



**ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK:** **Stellan Veloce** is a Berlin-based Sardinian multi-instrumentalist and composer. They studied cello at the Cagliari Conservatory and composition at the Universität der Künste Berlin and the California Institute of the Arts. Their music focuses on timbral research, iteration and modulations of sound densities, integrating composition with improvisation and band playing. Their background in traditional Sardinian music is a important subliminal inspiration of their work. Beside performing live they compose music for ensembles and for dance performances, favoring collaborative practices. Since 2018 they collaborate regularly with Irish choreographer [Sheena McGrandles](#) and composer [Neo Hülcker](#). They occasionally work on stage or studio in the pop music sphere ([Kenichi & the sun](#), [Dear Reader](#), [Kat Frankie](#), [Danso Key](#) and others) most recently with pop icon [Peaches](#). Veloce's first LP "[Complesso Spettro](#)" includes two pieces for sextet that serve as a bridge between the different manifestations of their music, such as experimental rock, contemporary music and improvisation. [www.stellanveloce.de](http://www.stellanveloce.de)



# KEY CREATIVES



**CREATIVE PRODUCTION:** **Catalina Flórez Ibarra** is a Colombian producer, journalist and documentary director, founder and executive director of urua Films. Since 2019 she coordinates and direct the German intersectional mentoring programme for women\* filmmakers [INTO THE WILD](#), for which she recently won the Robert Geisendörfer Award for her social engagement. Catalina has produced and directed award-winning films as her latest produced documentary [Until the Sun Dies](#), which was awarded with the Silver Biznaga for Best Director and get the Jury's mention for Best Documentary at the Malaga Film Festival, won Best Documentary at the Seattle Latino Film Festival, at the Sole Luna DOC and at the Würzburg International Film Weekend and Best Cinematographer at ACHTUNG BERLIN. Or her last directed film [Orlando - or a Brief History of the Middle Class](#) which had its world premiere in the official competition of the Ji.hlava Film Festival and won Best Documentary at the Mannheim Arts and Film Festival. Catalina studied documentary film directing at the Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg and the EICTV in Cuba, as well as journalism and communication studies in Colombia. She is an alumna of the Hans Böckler Stiftung and the Baden-Württemberg Stipendium. Furthermore, she has been speaker and jury member at film funds, markets and film labs worldwide.

**PRODUCTION HOUSE:** **urua Films GmbH** urua Films is a female-led production house that passionately collaborates with diverse and international artists to bring their films to light. Urua produces documentaries and feature films in co-production with Latin America, the Caribbean and Europe.

We see ourselves as a creative platform where the exchange of cultural and cinematic knowledge between different countries is our company philosophy. [uruafilms.com](https://uruafilms.com)







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