

Mithu Sen, Breathing, Video, 3min 18 sec, 2006

Technological Exorcism And Politics Of Image

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The exhibition titled "Still Moving Image" curated by Deeksha Nath from Aug–Nov 2008, being the inaugural exhibition of Devi Art Foundation, it can be seen as a part of the spatial strategy of unfolding of the space and its appropriation from the abstract imagined spaces to concrete physical places. The proposition of Devi Art Foundation is to facilitate viewership of creative expression and artistic practice that exist in India out of Lekha and Anupam Poddar's collection in a spread over two floors with an area of 7500sq m. The Foundation with its proposition may make "an intervention in art as an institution" in Indian context.

All these approaches are still lacking in Indian context, despite the visibility and strong hold of contemporary Indian art in international scenario.

The show "Still moving images" implies the still image i.e. photography and moving images i.e. video which goes well with the objectives of the foundations i.e. the scope for experimentation in new media and with the potential for a wider viewership. In many of the works, the recycled life of images manipulated by a wide range of technologies of video, film, computers, analogue and digital editing, original and archival footage, installation and photography, single-channel and multiple channels and audience interactivity which shred, layer, decompose and recombine within their formal designs for new meaning production. There is the imperative to constantly invent new languages for visual/psychic exploration which gives a fresh retreat and renewed sensorial experience with one of the most contemporary thinking and practices in Indian art.

These various projects navigate a complex terrain with the ideas of nation and its fragments and the political nightmares of war. Also the domain of politics of gender and sexual identity from personal to the level of community, faces of rapid urbanisation, the surrealist nightmare and other thinking were part of the exhibition.



Sonia Khurana, *Tantra*, Video, 1min 40sec, 2004

In production level, the promotion of cutting edge and experimental art, in consumption and dissemination level the attempt is to bridge the gap between the production of art and the audience, for viewing of the work of art by the general public, helping the young curators, critics and giving voice to their concerns and also interaction with the art and artists of South-Asian countries.

But the interesting fact about majority of the artists was the sense of place from which they are operating and lending some organic context and contents to their work of art.

The installation in video-triptych *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* (1998) by Nalini Malani, inspired by a short story of Sa'adat Hassan Manto, stands as one of the most ambitious work in the show. Made after the first nuclear test in India in 1998, here in the two screens there are two women unscrolling themselves on the ground and there is distortion of face and movement with the sequence of bombing. Twelve refugee trunks with their worldly possessions and the TVs inside it, feature

memories and trauma of partition of family and collective life, migration of refugees across the country, retraction of the traumatized infants into the womb. The large central screen with the single celled animation drawing of the artist layered with the material of *Little Boy* and *Fat man*, the American bomb causing devastation in Japan during World War II. A multitude of discordant images taken from personal movies, archival footage of war, family snapshots are digitized and morphed, relate to painful and repressed memory of partition of India and Pakistan.

In the video documentation work of Tejal Shah *Mumbai Meri Jaan*, there is direct interaction of the artist with the public about the foundational issue in India with respect to democracy and secularism during the act of amusement of shooting at balloons shaped in *I Love India* in different colours. There is the superimposition of the images related to the devastating carnage at the Godhra along with the participant's reaction. The work shows the different degree of awareness and apathy of the public about the current socio-political situation simultaneously engaging the audience for self scrutinization.

In Tushar Joag's single channel video piece *Phantom* in post Godhra period, there is the recovery of the repressed psychic images that are sedimentary layers of geology of the self, composed of public life, histories, subjectivities, and traumas. And with the spread of the politics of hatred by the right wing act, the attempt of the artist is to get rid of the acquired inheritance may be by the process of auctioning it. In Shilpa Gupta's *Untitled* video work where audience interaction is an integral part of the art work. It is programmed beforehand to gradually engulf the audience by the striking of the shadow of objects of different shapes. And the audience then completely submerged within it showing the vulnerable position of the individual with respect to the different socio-political forces in society but at the same time the actor has some space to play in one's own way.

Gender and sexuality is the most travelled terrain in this specific exhibition and the artists have different nature of engagement with respect to the foundational aspect of these category as well as the stereotypes related to it. The images sometimes shed and alter their facticity and fixity, functions as more layered narratives that generate variegated meaning through juxtaposition.

A few of the works address the subdued position of women in Indian society. In Sheba Chhachhi's *Mermaid's Mirror* (2005), the 36 small toy like television sets showed in slow motion the tragic role of the Hindi film actress Meena Kumari, in 25 movies from 1940-1972. The work signifies the social structure where the women bereft of the previously attributed power to the mermaid, i.e. to amuse, distract and sometimes destroy the man, now reduced only to the sacrificing and inspiring beloved of his man. Pushpamala N. through the series of her photograph *The native Indian Women* made in collaboration with Clare Arni, she tries to re-enact the stereotypical representation of South Indian women in everyday life and by thus drawing the attention for the critical review by the public. Valaya Shende in his video work *Madharchodho* (2006) portrays the derogatory representation and subordinate position of women in everyday life in India. The half veiled traditional women imprinted on the welcome doormat each time to be smashed by the man and the back ground music of old Hindi film song with the inviting gesture accentuating the existence of women as an object of sexual fantasy. Bharati Kher in her "Chocolate muffins", "the family portrait" and other archival, digital prints, had a liberating attempt by the subversion of cliché of domestic life of a women i.e. from a good house wife and mother to a detesting and scornful human-animal hybrid form through the process of metamorphosis by juxtaposition and technical effects.

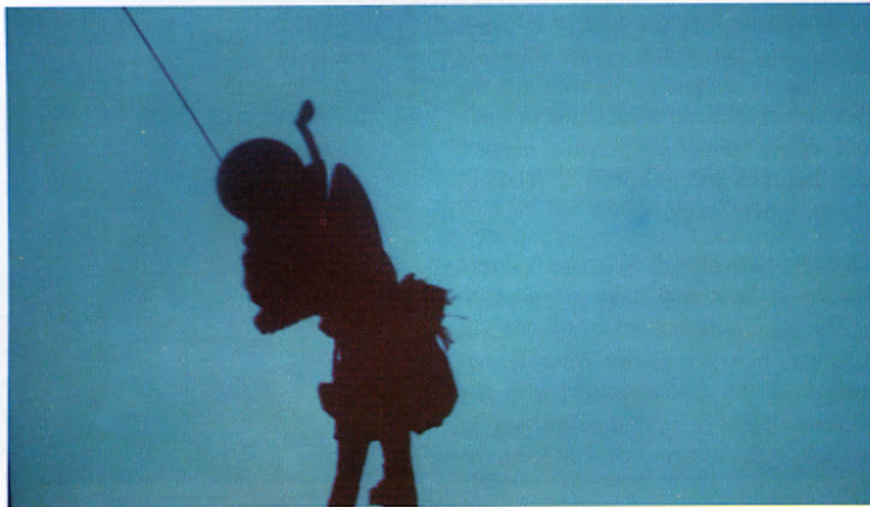
In Astha Chouhan's photographic work *The Scream*, there is the juxtaposition and transposition of the photographs of her performance which is the apprehension and vulnerability of being a young women in India. In Surekha's video work *Line of*



Bharati Kher, *Chocolate Muffin*
Archival digital c-print, 30" x 40", 2004

Control there is the ceaseless struggle by the ant to get out of the constructed boundary by the human agency and the artist also in constant endeavour to get out of the existing seclusion. Ultimately both are successful in their endeavour signifying any boundary causing suffering and afflictions is not the natural and which can always be challenged and transgressed.

A few artists are dealing with the illusion of sensuality and gender and addressing the larger issues of the time. Mithu Sen's video work *Breathing* is about the construction of the self by the gaze of the commodified world and the disillusionment of the same with time. In a mysterious environment, a hairy body



Shilpa Gupta, *Untitled*, Video projection

part embedded with glittering wires, creating a mystique environment with the feeling and sensation of different forms and the movement of female genital. The whole process is disillusioned when the hairy part dropped from the artist's body. Sonia Khurana's work *Tantra* (2004), there is the slow and gradual transformation of a form resembling the female genital to the mouth of the black person which again turned into his mirror image in the darken atmosphere. A strange and interesting juxtaposition of the categories of gender, ethnicity and race simultaneously addressing the cultural boundary and transgressing it.

Some of the artists try to explore the uncertain terrain of gender and sexuality in the deliberate traversing the terrain of the **other** within one's own self. Ram Rahman look to the *Bhavai* dancers, the traditional dancers from Gujarat where the male is cross dressed to perform the role of female or sometimes the *Ardhanariswara*, (the half male, half female). In Ravi Agarwal's performance based digital photograph *Feminities*, where the artist with the male gaze, looking at the semi-naked self, with an attempt to search the feminine within the self and lying seductively on the bed. What is the psychological state with respect to gender and sexuality in this state? What happens when it is a regular part in life or it is a temporary deliberate act? Is there any trace when they return to their

everyday life? These are a few questions both the work raise.

Ranbir Kaleka's well known video work *Man with Cockerel-2*, in a surrealist atmosphere where a bald man trying to hold a cockerel in a position. It managed to escape each time despite the repetitive effort of the man which signifies the difficulty of controlling one's own desire, the libidinal impulse in particular, in spite of all attempts. Rameswhar Broota's single channel video *The Body*, is one of the most effective but disturbing work in terms of use of video as a medium with heightened sensorial impact and the repugnance feeling. Here a pink male

torso hanging just like in butcher shop, rashly treated and violently messaged by a man and the spate of animal drive in the atmosphere is accentuated by the sound in the background adding to the surrealist atmosphere. There is the nightmare of being brutally tortured by homosexual being and is soothed by the beautiful touch of a woman.

In a few other works, the imageries function as new referents and signs with new meanings in the changing context. A large number of works address the devastating effect of indiscriminate process of urbanisation and some relating it with the impact on the life of common man. *Reality Bite*, *Reality Sting*, *Reality Itch* are Tushar Joag's digitally manipulated photographs highlight the substitutions of the shanties by the high rise buildings with no place for common man in Mumbai. The other work *Jataka Trilogy* through animation, performance and brief sketches, projects the apathetic attitude and insensitivity of the rich and middle class towards those in abject poverty and helplessness. Baptist Coelho in his photograph *Neighbourhood # 2* symbolizes the overlapping, interference of the public space of one with the private space of the other in the over-crowded city of Mumbai. The video work *Polluted Waters* (2007) by Ravi Agrawal, there is the aestheticization of the process of pollution of water by slow diffusion of blue ink in water. He highlights here, how water is treated as the 'other'

Navin Thomas, *Still Asleep*, Print on Archival paper, 51" x 35", 2006



which is abused and discarded. Agarwal's photograph *Shroud* (2006), where his body is covered with white cloth ready for funeral rite with the hope of a new birth and renewed relationship with the nature, where nature will be the extension of the self rather than the distanced other to be exploited. Vivan Sundaram's photographic installation *Great Indian Bazaar* is from the colour photographs of a Sunday market near the Red Fort of Delhi, which is the dumping ground of the second hand goods for resale. There is the emergence of a new consumer class at the margin depending on the debris of the national and international consumer society. Kiran Subbaiah in his series of photographs *Doing Without* retreats towards the philosophy of "minimalism and the presence of absence" in a world of excess and unending chase. Navin Thomas in his work *Still Asleep* highlights the evolution of a new nocturnal species in Bangalore due to the mushrooming of BPO (Business Processing Outsource) with corporate suits or pyjamas and parrot like face and catering to the cliental in abroad in a large comic book type story installation. The performance based photograph *Encounter* a continuous collaborative performance by Tejal Shah and Varsha Nair in important architectural spaces in the world. The extended sleeves like the endoskeleton are joined together, a sense of being connected and in touch in an increasingly isolated life in cities.

There are a few works with emphasis on the process of the art making. In Sushanta Mandal's work, the use of lens and soap bubbles are important parts emphasizing the process of scrutinization of the material and also the process itself is important for him in production of meaning. In the specific art titled *It's a regular Scrutiny* his attempt is to problematize the act of relating meaning by scrutinization of surface features e.g skin, colour etc. His other work *It is not winter, but I am feeling Cold* is an attempt to break the general apathy of people towards the socio-economic condition unless until it is directly relating to them. Avinash Veeraraghavan through his double channel video work *Home Sweet Home* projects, how difficult it is to capture, construct and define an experience, image and space, here it is one's own home, in its entirety due to the discrete, decentred and fragment process of perception as well as memory which otherwise attribute an uniqueness to the same. Through the three kinds of hearts i.e. the iconic, the real and mechanical hearts in the milky fluid, Sudarshan Shetty in his work *Love* reflects the tender and sublime feeling and the undefined act of love in an increasingly commoditized world with changing values.

The work *Mashk* (2006), consists of a documented performance of video by Atul Bhalla, a series of photographs and the knife used in the performance and the mashk. It was as an outcome of the artist-in-residence in Old Delhi. The artist had been working on 'water' as a concept and hence conceived the idea of *Mashk*, the traditional water carrier system, to examine and intervene into a community of Qureshi, the traditional butchers. He wanted to get a mashk made which would be totally of his own and hence halal the goat himself under the guidance of a reluctant Qureshi. The whole process as well as the mashk made were displayed in the local hotel and viewed by the artists, local people and the Qureshis and with different reactions and feed back. In the performance, which is out of its ritualistic context, one can see the life, vulnerability and death of the goat at the same time the

concentration, reactions and power of the artist during the process of execution. The strong assertion of artistic identity in the making of the *Mashk* in public space with the simultaneous claim of intervention in Qureshi community is a contradiction and sometime problematic in itself.

A few reflections arise: Devi Art Foundation, if work according to the propositions, will undoubtedly contribute towards the promotion of contemporary and cutting edge Indian art in the foundational level. The continuation of the same in the long run is a self challenge. So far as the location



Nalini Malani, *Remembering Tobatek Singh*, Video Installation with sound tvs, lihafa and tin trunks, 20mins

of the foundation is concerned, sometimes it is apprehended that the viewership may be limited to the art world people only at best the elite circle with a remote chance for the common viewers. In case of collection, besides personal liking, an objective attitude will add to the quality. The other larger question arises: apart from the mediumistic and manipulative potential of video and photography as a medium of visual language, to what extent we are aware and addressing the radical potential of these mediums for reaching out to a larger viewers/ audience both within/ outside and gallery space, is a question upon to all.