

EMBEDDED SCRIPTS /

WITNESSING THE WORK OF AMAR KANWAR

“The kind of reading I have in mind would not assume a direct correspondence between words and things, nor confine itself to single meanings, nor aim for the resolution of contradiction. It would not render process as linear, nor rest explanation on simple

correlations or single variables. Rather it would grant to ‘the literary’ an integral, even irreducible, status of its own. To grant such status is not to make ‘the literary’ foundational, but to open new possibilities for analyzing discursive productions of social and political reality as complex, contradictory processes.” (Joan W. Scott, “Experience”, 1992)¹

The Torn First Pages by New Delhi-based filmmaker Amar Kanwar, conceived as a continuous investigation and taking the form of a nineteen-channel video installation, treats the conflicts in Burma (Myanmar) from 2004 onto the present day. The work is dedicated to the Burmese bookshop owner Ko Than Htay in Mandalay, who was imprisoned for tearing out the first page of all books and journals before selling them. By law the first page of every book and any published printed matter—such as magazines or newspapers—is reserved for the ideological slogans of the military junta and a denunciation of democratic forces, which renders their removal a direct act of resistance against the regime punishable by prosecution. For his defiant gesture, Htay was arrested in December 1994 and sentenced to three years imprisonment and torture in the infamous Mandalay prison. He carried out his resistance against the military dictatorship as an individual act of civil courage.

Kanwar’s three-part installation consists of nineteen video projections onto papers hung as *floating scripts* on three separate metal constructions. The piece is also accompanied by a little book consisting of imagery, some of which is included in the installation, and additional texts and materials. The first page had not been torn out and contains the military doctrine as described above. In part one we see six distinct films, of which five are a series of portraits. In one of the moving images I recognize a man in a suit tossing something pink, perhaps flowers, onto a bigger field of color. He is accompanied by other men in suits who stand in line, many with static and serious expression, while others look at the ground. The gesture of the general is repeated. At first the rhythmic repetitions, accompanied by the sounds of camera clicks, causes me to feel a certain aggression, perhaps rage; in time, though, that feeling gives way to the impression of being witness to a nonsensical gesture, an empty meaningless ritual. Upon further investigation I discover that the footage for *The Face* was secretly shot at a ceremony in Rajghat on October 25, 2004, during an official visit by General Than Shwe, supreme head of the Burmese military dictatorship, who had been invited by the Indian government. It is the General who is tossing rose petals at the cremation memorial site of Mahatma Gandhi in Delhi, a gesture that had been restaged for the international press. What happened before, I cannot know from what I see, but then I read Amar Kanwar’s text in the *Himal Magazine* published in Kathmandu, Nepal. The cover story is entitled “Gandhi and the

/ RELATIONAL GRAMMARS

Witnessing *The Torn First Pages* we find ourselves in a space in

which each viewer discovers their own unique relationship to the narratives embedded in the imagery. It consists of a whole range of dissident voices, which again contain another range of dissident conscious and unconscious narratives, personal or collective memories, (hi-)stories and experiences, all of which speak to us, draw us into a *conflict zone*—to use a phrase Amar Kanwar deploys to describe and link his investigations across the South-Asian subcontinent. There will also be multiple distances or closenesses in relation to the many centres within the *The Torn First Pages*, as every viewer also carries their own multiple and multiply related stories into the exhibition.

“IF WE WERE TO JUST LOOK AT YOUR OWN SELF, YOU WOULD FIND THAT THERE ARE MANY EXPERIENCES, THOUGHTS, DEFINITIONS—FRAGMENTS THAT SPAN A VERY LARGE AMOUNT OF TIME IN HISTORY THAT ALL CONSTITUTE YOUR OWN SELF.”²

If we look at the fabric of opinions, information, experiences, feelings, triggered memories ... I tried to construct this in the first part of the text in order to show the obvious contradictions and gaps that we encounter between described realities, the information inscribed in images, and their actual visual/visceral representations. We realize that everyone is likely to experience something different or many different things. I can see a man in uniform, whereas another might only see a man, a third a general, and yet another will see *the* General, recognizing his face easily from an international newspaper or from physical familiarity, one as a politician and another as a family member, one in hate and one in love. One will see something pink, another will see flowers, a third will be able to identify the memorial site, and a fourth will know the precise name of the flower used on such occasions—what it means symbolically and/or personally. In his essay “‘Getting to Know You...’: Knowledge, Power, and the Body,” Bill Nichols writes, “How do we come to know others and the worlds they inhabit? If knowledge arises, in large part, from subjective, embodied experience, to what extent can it be represented by impersonal and disembodied language? What strategies are available to us for the representation of people, their experience, and the encounters we wish to have of them?” He continues: “To what extent can the particular serve as an illustration for the general? Not only *what* general but *whose* general principle does the particular illustrate? To what extent are generalizations misunderstandings of the nature of the particular, the concrete, the everyday and what does this mean for historically located individuals?”³

General” and the paragraph is titled “Blood-red petals.” He writes, “The moment finally arrives. Than Shwe has come back to the place where Gandhi’s feet laid at his final resting place. It is the twenty-first century. Aung San Suu Kyi is still imprisoned. Thousands of political activists, artists, poets, journalists across three generations have been killed, lie in prisons, or are scattered in exile across the globe. Blithely, the Supreme Dictator picks up a handful of soft rose petals and tosses them gently into the air. They fall silently on the cremation site of Gandhi. The Supreme Dictator reaches out again toward the basket. There is still no change in his expression.”

According to Kanwar, the projected footage contains the repetition of the original action, as a photographer missed it and shouted in panic: “Excuse me, sir, excuse me! Once more! Once more, please!”

What is it that we actually see? Let’s look again at the image of General Than Shwe at the memorial site of Mahatma Gandhi. What do we detect beneath the surface of the images? The rarely seen General, who according to rumor carefully avoids his public depiction, spreads flowers on the cremation site of the spiritual and political leader of one of the biggest non-violent civil right movements in history. A movement identified with a form of resistance that in essence opposes to the form of dictatorship that the General masterminds in Burma. In an interview with Martijn van Nieuwenhuyzen, Kanwar describes how through his artistic intervention of repetition *The Face* develops an energy that suddenly renders it a “homage to Gandhi, (it) critiques the Indian government’s support of the Burmese military as well as (it) becomes evidence of a moral and spiritual crime,” the depiction of a violation, the simulated and hypocritical act of pretended tribute—an act of appropriation in fact. Kanwar, in another text, asked: “We know what Pinochet and Idi Amin looked like but have you seen the face of the Supreme Burmese dictator Senior General Than Shwe?” Ida Kierulf remarks: “The Face presents us with the mask-like face of a public figure that is seldom seen in public—the Burmese General and Head of State.”

In the same part of *The Torn First Pages* we find imagery of Thet Win Aung, student leader of the protests in 1998, who was sentenced to fifty-nine years in Mandalay prison for having helped to organize student protests since 1988, when he was a high-school student. At the age of thirty-four, on October 16, 2006, Aung was killed in prison. A text on the exhibition of Kanwar in the Whitechapel Gallery in 2007 describes the piece as follows: “Kanwar’s silent elegy shows a black-and-white photograph of Thet Win’s youthful face being delicately hoisted into place, positioned high on a white wall, a place traditionally reserved for icons and heroes. The tenderness with which an anonymous individual installs the piece is in stark contrast to Thet Win’s barbaric treatment. The respectful silence that accompanies this ceremony not only highlights the solemnity of the occasion but references the gagging of the Burmese media by Than Shwe’s government.” Aung Din, of the US-based Campaign for Burma, has said: “We believe that physical and psychological torture inflicted on Thet Win Aung by his captors was the main reason for his untimely death.” In another projection in part one of *The Torn*

In my relation to the *conflict zone* I can only understand and maybe try and decode some parts of what is thoroughly encoded, as Amar Kanwar cannot fulfil the task to encode and represent the conflict itself in its completeness since he has access to neither a singular inside nor an outside perspective and is part of it in a relational way always. Maybe we will share some experiences; maybe we will share none at all. Some images might contain a veracity that the artist himself could not know, and can only predict as an uncertain feeling of unease. Or, on the contrary, perhaps a feeling of freedom or even bliss touched him when seeing and deciding upon an image. Maybe he picked it for a different reason than someone else would and maybe he’ll never hear about another person’s strong relation to this same picture. Kanwar doesn’t think in terms of singularities: “Once you see and accept that there is a heterogeneous audience, that each member of the audience has a complex history of life experience and memory, it is a bit pathetic if you are going to start making unilateral messages for such a rich, complex audience.”⁴

“Ce n’est pas une image juste. C’est juste une image,” stated French New Wave filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard in 1969, in the Dziga Vertov Group film *Le Vent de l’Est*. He was being confronted with telling a left-out true story based on historical realities, and thereby asking for the potential meaning and capability of the depiction and reconstruction of reality and the role an image could take within it. In fact discovering that the actual veracity and emergence might lie in what is not shown and in what is not said, or in what cannot be depicted—the *unrepresentable*. Let’s close our eyes and think again about the second part of the exhibition: Seven blank paper screens are linked through the fragmented stories inscribed, simultaneously one and simultaneously together shattered in times and spaces, overlapping: a house, English lessons, a still life of food, machines, workers, paintings of Aung San Suu Kyi and Gandhi, children playing and drawing and writing in English and in their native language, supposedly traditional dancing classes, the recall of a resistant member, tears, unspeakable words, silences, “my father was also involved in the uprising.” Images pass by, filmed from the inside of a moving car, a hand bearing a cigarette, smoke, a song from Santana on the radio interrupted by the radio announcer, the Statue of Liberty, a seagull, a man, a poem, “my cheroot’s burnt down / the sun has set / take me home,” Tin Moe, a cigarette, a baby brought to bed in slow motion. “How do we recall?” Kanwar seems to ask, and, “How could we recall?” The imagery and the sounds the artist proposes—closed-up parts of bodies, still lifes, wide-angle shots of objects, colored dissolves, gestures, details of spaces, breathing, sounds of sites, spoken words—seem to stand for or contain something more, they seem to work like windows into realities. Kanwar wrote to me: “If you try and recall you see that the nature of recall is often fragmented—and yet the images come together—in a way there is a larger narrative that comes together inside your head that is far greater, larger than a certain journey and the poem.”

First Pages we rediscover the forgotten photograph of Ma Win Maw Oo, a high school student who was shot dead by Burmese soldiers during the 8888 Uprising in 1988. The film is based on one picture, which contains the moment in which Ma Win Maw Oo was carried away by two medical students immediately after she had been shot. “The killing gained worldwide publicity for a day as a news photograph before it disappeared from public memory,” Kanwar has noted. *The Win Aung* and *Ma Win Maw Oo* (both 2005) center on and pay tribute to two Burmese citizens killed for their resistance to the Burmese military dictatorship. Both films are short and based on a single photographic depiction and emerge from a “single frame” in which Amar Kanwar “wanted to explore a universe.” Another witness to the work, Devika Singh, in her article “The Compass that keeps Spinning,” described her experience of this pair of works in the following manner: “In the first seconds of the four-minute visual essay, blurred and indistinct black-and-white forms appear. Gradually, the face of the young political activist [...] appears on a large photograph suspended on a wooden pole and is slowly hung onto a wall. By contrast, in *Ma Win Maw Oo*, bright red and orange hues invade the screen and then recede to reveal two medical students trying to rescue the thirteen-year old girl [...]” Further, she remarks: “Here, Kanwar does not attempt to reconstruct his subjects’ stories; by putting still photographs in motion, he points to the irreversible gap between them and the living.” What does Khin Htay Htay Win, the mother of Ma Win Maw Oo, see and remember and feel when looking at Kanwar’s images? “I still miss my daughter every day,” she says. “Today, I want to cry the way my daughter cried. They said that they opened fire in the sky. But they aimed at her straight. That’s why she died straight away. In my heart, my daughter did it for her country; she gave up her life for the country.” Kanwar asks: “And how to bring back your memory, Ma Win Maw Oo, and that day in 1988?”

As I watch the vibrant colors of the rhythmically pulsing blurry and distorted imagery—before it dissolves into its resolution—other images flicker into my consciousness: open wounds, a heart beating, a feeling of fragility but also warmth, sympathy, and security, which I experience as a space of memory, a space for the depicted victim to remain and rest, perhaps.

Another film, also within the first part and entitled *The Bodhi Tree*, contains the story of Sitt Nyein Aye, a well-known Burmese dissident painter who had to escape from Burma after the military crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations in August 1988. Now living in exile in New Delhi, he continues his work as an artist in a small studio under a bodhi tree. The scene in which two men carry a painting of Mahatma Gandhi and Aung San Suu Kyi through the streets, Kanwar describes as follows: “the fleeting glimpses of a painted portrait of Aung San Suu Kyi and Gandhi being carried down the streets, and the faces in a crowd during a political rally demonstrate how portraits become representations of opposition.” As the moving images depict a man preparing something we later identify as canvases in his outdoor studio, a strong wind starts and it seems about to rain. We hear the noises of worked wood, rain,

The images Kanwar proposes don’t depict or illustrate reality as such. They rather contain or bear realities. They even have the capacity of activating memories as complex psychological processes that, on the one hand, offer a site or a space for their negotiation and/or reconciliation, but, on the other, could also affect and thus have the potential of effecting not only a change in reception but one’s script or grammar as base or place of departure of (future) operations. As was Godard in his famous quotation, we are not just speaking of realities in general. The work of Kanwar is located in zones of conflict, treats war and its effects, and is mostly related to traumatic experiences. As Katy Rogers points out in her essay “Creating a Dialogue with Historical Traumas” on Kanwar’s film *Ma Win Maw Oo*: The artist “fills a traumatic, indelible void in collective Burmese consciousness by granting life to the one who lost it,” and he “forces memory back to his viewers,” relating them to their/everybody’s *own* past. She even takes it a step further in making the comparison to the psychoanalytic goal of “bringing the patient to terms with a past trauma so as to incorporate it into his or her psyche, thus allowing for its productive negotiation in the future.”⁵ Kanwar’s work offers a way for oppressed memories and narratives of traumatic events to find a way (back) into the present consciousnesses while respecting the multiplicity of its audiences. This allows for each viewer to find a *personal way*, according to different times and spaces, for diverse rhythms to emerge that respect the different social, political, personal vantage points brought to bear upon them, as well as how fast, when, or where to approach the embedded scripts, or how close to get or how distant to remain at any one time. These multiple *personal ways*, of course, can cross at any time and/or (temporarily) overlap, but also reverse and move in many other ways.

Ravi Vasudevan wrote in the context of Amar Kanwar’s film *A Season Outside* (1997): “In contrast to the campaign or activist documentary, with its own, very important field of pertinence, the reflective form opens the possibilities of inquiry rather than making the definitive truth claims and establishing clear-cut critical paradigms.”⁶ Elsewhere, Anne Rutherford asked Kanwar this question: “If you’re working in this way there’s a lot of open-endedness about how the images get interpreted. How do you work with that politically, given that your project is to make political films?” Kanwar’s response: “I don’t think that dealing with multiplicity and putting forth your point of view are contradictory. Further, I think in the global political situation, any political activist would know that the audience he is trying to reach out to is of many kinds, with many rationales and many histories. Even if you want to make just a convincing kind of argument film, you will find that you don’t end up convincing at all.”⁷ Kanwar’s poetic approach to the political constantly oscillates along the boundaries of the touched-upon *conflict zones*, keeping them intact and breathing, making them visible instead of disguising them.

The notion of reality that Amar Kanwar proposes to us already incorporates the problematic field of its representability/representation, but tries nonetheless

leaves in the wind, and other sounds from the immediate environment— in between we see imagery of the sky, leaves, the fragile roof, a fabric, white, dissolved blanks. Aye and some other men become agitated and begin to wrap up his paintings with black plastic sheets in order to protect them from the rain, since inside there is not enough space. As the film progresses, we see people sitting, possibly waiting, and clapping hands, as well as a Buddhist monk standing in a gallery in front of black-and-white images of other monks whose names are written below them. “Are they alive?” I ask myself.

Each of the metal frames of *The Torn First Pages*, within which hang the paper screens with the rear-projected videos, are like the centre-spread pages of a large book. On the right, hanging alone, is another film, titled *Somewhere in May*. The text describes it thusly: “*Somewhere in May* lies within the intersection of freedom and claustrophobia, democracy and its simulation, the holy mission of great national projects and the individual’s relationship with the politics of today. In the torturous normalcy of exile two events occur on the same day in the city of Oslo. The May 17th celebrations of the Norwegian National Day in 2004 was also the day the Burmese military dictatorship began a sham National Convention for Democracy inside Burma. Through the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), a small radio station in Oslo, the Burmese resistance reported on this sham convention as it broadcasted news that was secretly heard by thousands within Burma.”

In the second thematic section of *The Torn First Pages* we experience a story in pieces, fragmented and distributed across seven screens. The narratives tell of a community in exile, from within which—according to the words of the artist—“shoots out a tangent that heads to New York in search of a poet and a poem,” a long journey with another Burmese activist. At the end of this adventure they finally find the famous poet Tin Moe, exiled from Burma, and recorded him reciting his famous poem that was also found scribbled on the walls of prisons inside Burma. The poem goes: “My cheeroot’s burnt down. The sun has set. Take me home.” Kanwar writes: “The haiku metaphorically represents the state of Burma under the military and the aspirations of the people.” This section emerges, somewhat surprisingly, from the small town of Fort Wayne, Indiana, where a large Burmese community lives in exile with activists from Burmese and ethnic nationalities from several generations. While still politically active, they make their living as assembly-line workers in the ancillary industries of major automobile factories. The screens are simultaneously linked by blanks, which are sometimes lightened by the imagery of the projected stories. And as the blanks—which seem to take up more time than the projected images—I entertain the sneaking suspicion that these empty spaces could also contain many more stories than the visuals represents or could represent. Are the underlying stories that are too difficult to be told set free through this format? Do they find a way into our presence?

In the third part of the exhibition we encounter “old and new archival footage

to redefine what we by habit are used or trained to acknowledge and define as reality. He opens up the notion in order to fill it with a whole range of new possible contents, containers, and activators. I remember a scene from the recent film *Stalags*, by Ari Libsker, on pornographic fiction in Israel. It uses archival footage from the infamous Eichmann Process in Jerusalem in 1961, during which the fiction writer Yehiel de-Nur / K. Tzetnik—a survivor of the Holocaust and the Auschwitz concentration camp—is called to the witness stand. He recalls the place and of Auschwitz as “another planet.” He faints. He claims that everything described in his fiction is real. Where do we find evidence, when we redefine what is part of this reality, besides factual knowledge? Knowing that the traces traumatic events leave behind could even be untraceable, that a victim to crime could show even *invisible* symptoms such as partial or complete amnesia, denial and many others, where do we find evidence? Could the act of (re-)collecting evidence, the attempt to find an *image juste*, become the evidence itself? When Kanwar sends the words

“IMAGINE THE FORMAL PRESENTATION OF POETRY AS EVIDENCE IN A FUTURE WAR CRIMES TRIBUNAL. IMAGINE NINETEEN SHEETS OF PAPER FLOATING FOREVER IN THE WIND...”

ahead of his exhibition, I would read exactly along the attempt of (re-)negotiating the boundaries of the already defined in order to create a space of future potentialities in the reading and recalling of violence and crime by means of different, unseen, overlooked, or erased sources. Kanwar again: “To keep collecting evidence when confronted with continuous brutality is only possible when there is hope for a better future.”⁸

— GABRIELLE CRAM

anonymously and secretly filmed inside Burma,” which contains “black-and-white footage from the time of the independence of Burma, the generals, the 8888 Uprising, the recent rebellion by the monks” shot by both well-known and anonymous professionals as well as amateur filmmakers whose names remain protected by anonymity or by organizational cover. On three projections we watch people on the streets, dead bodies, bloodied bodies, fire, smoke, people in uniforms, monks in robes, the army attacking people and monks. . . . On a second set of three paper screens I see the projection of a man in uniform again accompanied by other men in uniforms, and barely legible fragments of texts underly the images. Kanwar writes: “The three screens distort the archive in order to create the laughing triptych of General Ne Win, the first Burmese dictator, along with his coterie.” The underlying texts, which are printed directly on the paper sheets, consist precisely of the texts as on the aforementioned torn-out first pages, and describe the restrictions invented by the military dictatorship.

In texts, the little book, Wikipedia ghost writings, weblogs, and other sources I discover more about the economic and historical background of the conflict zone depicted in the work. From an article on the website of Mizzima News on “Media in Burma” I understand that the image takes on a different meaning in the context of the much publicised September Uprisings of 2007. In the 1988 uprising, information (and especially visual documentation) of the events were not easily available and were censored by the military regime; the Internet was not accessible and news reports had been continuously blocked by the government. The detention of journalists also marks a certain continuity in the history of the repression in Burma. Since the “8888 Uprisings” in 1988 hardly any images, save for the aforementioned photograph of the assassinated student Ma Win Maw Oo, managed to escape into public realm. Reading another chapter of the same article entitled “Media as Counter Offensive: Junta Way of Looking at Media,” I need to ask myself what uncomfortable truth could lie in the self-legitimation of information detention of the military regime when Burmese Minister for Information Brig-Gen Kyaw Hsan states, while attending the inauguration of a journalists’ training program in Rangoon in September 2005, that “the countries with the strong media arm” are trying to “bully and dominate small nations through the practice of neo-colonialism.” Devika Singh describes that while watching Kanwar’s work she listens to the recurrent voice-over of the artist and reads first-person commentaries as subtitles, which are experienced as an “omniscient presence addressing the victims he portrays. But it is not so much with them as with the viewer, who becomes part of the collective we often referred to in the voice-overs and subtitles, that Kanwar connects.” *The Tom First Pages*, with films shot in India, Norway, and the United States, plus archival material secretly filmed in Burma, is conceived—according to the words of Kanwar in the interview with Martijn van Nieuwenhuyzen—“to exist as a moving image constellation that tangentially engages with the Burmese resistance and the question of democracy, exile and individual courage. It intends to draw us all into the Burmese resistance no matter where and how far away we are.”

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5. Rogers, Katy (2006), “Memory’s Void”, in “Image War”, ISP Exhibition, Whitney Museum, New York.
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8. Van Nieuwenhuyzen, Martijn (2008), “Amar Kanwar. Collecting Evidence,” in *Flash Art*, January/February.