



Conversation with Amar Kanwar

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On viewing one of Amar Kanwar's absorbing, fierce, and lyrical films the absence of an "objective" interlocutor is more than palpable. Rationalistic cause-and-effect dialectics are not favoured. This is one of the fundamental and conscious decisions on Kanwar's part that distinguishes him from the ranks of other politically inclined Indian filmmakers and documentarians. For Kanwar, it is rather the subject in itself (not a character in the film, or the filmmaker himself) whose articulation is established as the core of the cinematic process.

Having produced and directed several films, Kanwar has persistently engaged as filmmaker with the complex politics of violence that have engulfed the Indian subcontinent since it was partitioned into India and Pakistan in 1947. Continuing themes for him have been the division of families, sectarian violence, and border conflicts, interwoven with investigations of gender and sexuality, philosophy and religion. Amongst his most celebrated works are *A Season Outside* (1997), *A Night of Prophecy* (2002), and *The Lightning Testimonies* (2007), each one demonstrating his determination to fixate his own cinematic mise en scene on the disenfranchised citizen (the subject). Geeta Kapur establishes that by doing so Kanwar is investigating the very means of cinematic representation itself.

The focus of this conversation, however, will be geared less towards a detailed examination of the content of his films, which others have so rigorously and eloquently written about, but to a more specific inquiry into the various modes and techniques used by Kanwar in producing and delivering these moving images to his viewers.



I Considering that *The Lightning Testimonies* and *The Torn First Pages* (2004–08) are multi-channel installations, a transposition from the black box to the white cube is witnessed. After having worked so intensively with single-channel films, which it can be assumed were shown as adopting the single vantage perspective of classical cinema, what could such a re-siting in itself, from the theatre to the art gallery, suggest with regard to your artistic practice?

At a certain point during the summer afternoon, when the sun turns across the sky, a beautiful white light begins to reflect off the cars parked outside my window. The entire wall of my room lights up in the slowest possible manner. If ever there could be a sparkling white light that could be warm and cold at the same time then this is probably the one. In a few minutes the wall fills up with intricate shadow patterns from the leaves of the tree also outside the window. Everything is now moving. The light, its intensity, the shadows, and time of course. In a while the light vanishes and the rest of life rushes in.

There is a haiku written by Issa in the 18th century:

Lovely
Through the paper window hole
the galaxy

And another one by Seishi Yamaguchi:

On the winter river
A sheet of newspaper
floats open

The exploration of varied ways to *experience* the image is essentially a continuum of the practice of exploring the varied ways of *making* the image, of the understanding of time and the skill of telling a story. This process is not necessarily a forward movement towards a “re-siting or relocation”. It is perhaps a back and forth between layers of image and words, sound and thought, and between time. I never felt that I was in any classic fixed position in the first place, nor do I feel that I have moved into another fixed place. One could understand an ancient practice of story-telling or suddenly grasp maybe the oldest philosophical wisdom and this could result in the most “modern-looking” installation. One could re-understand the meaning of one’s own reality, which could momentarily change the way one sees the world. Again you then look afresh and tell anew. And this goes on. The point is not that I have worked extensively with single-channel films, the point is that I have worked extensively with images and sound, like so many others, and it is this process that continues, and travels in different ways to multiple spaces.

I think we all are in search of that tiny *image moment* that can contain the ocean with all its creatures and sounds. If you find that image moment it can be experienced in many different ways. The objective is to be able to transcend through many levels of “seeing”, to free oneself from each successive construct, and so each experience has its own unique value and offers its own special glimpse into the galaxy.

What is a film ?
A series of still frames?
How does it move?
When time passes through it, they all begin to move.
Does time exist and pass always in one fixed way?





II

It is essential to deliberate on the specific typologies of setups, modes and techniques employed in *The Lightning Testimonies* – old archival, new archival, old documentary, experimental image, graphic, drawing, painting, performance, song, and so on and so forth. There seems to be a definite infiltration of the white cube, a questioning of what can combine with and what is permissible within the confines of the art space. It could be proposed that your film in itself is synergized by the spirit of the ungraspable “other” (projected images slipping out of control), but yet there is a rigour and very determined thought behind its construction. Could you perhaps mention some of the specific organizational tools and methodologies you employed when building up the piece?

There always seems to exist a matrix of notions and expectations. This further translates into a personal and public matrix of tyranny. A matrix of what works and what doesn't. Obviously then emerge “custodians of the knowledge of what belongs and what doesn't” or rather of what is “supposed to belong” where. Whenever someone manages to free themselves from this matrix an interesting trajectory emerges and so that is always the first step.

However this terrain is extremely slippery. For instance a drop of water sliding along a wire could be “evocative” and also be intended to be “evocative”. How do we differentiate between the two? Who can see the difference? What is the image prior to the image of the drop of water? What comes after and why? – and so this leads you beyond *intention* towards a “certain preparation” that can give rise to a series of queries and the possible development of an informed yet intuitive eye.

Why is one image different from the other? Why does an image seem to contain many secrets? What can release them so as to suddenly connect with many unknown lives?

– and so on till another set of queries appears. For instance which description is more accurate of me – my physical coordinates and personal known data or my known fantasy and unknown involuntary recollections? Or is the knowledge of both terrains required? Which vocabulary is more capable of this combined articulation? Can two or three vocabularies coexist? What is the vocabulary of this so called “ungraspable other”? Can I research silence?

Sometimes there is a silence that is so large that you can almost physically touch it. At times silence can be very meticulously hidden. There could be a silence that breathes, a silence that whispers, a sullen silence, an angry silence, a fearful silence, and a dead silence. There is lonely silence and one that is quietly shared, a silence that is forced on you and a silence that you accept willingly, a silence that is just preceding sound and silence that is infinite, filled, or almost empty. There is even a silence within which you can hear everything else, the most minute of sounds becoming clear and amplified. Each of these silences have a word, a name, and an image. But do they all belong to the same language? Maybe? And what happens if many silences come close to each other? Is there a new resonating sound that emerges? Is there a methodology or a state of being that enables one to search for a set of words that have suddenly reappeared after thirty years? So then, how to listen, how to see?

The Lightning Testimonies, was based on a huge collaborative effort, it could only be completed because several individuals, communities, and dear friends nurtured and honed it with their knowledge and technical skills. This process in many ways contradicts the “divine” exclusivity of the artist and therefore, by extension, the exclusivity of any space. All spaces may then open, physically and metaphorically, and we could begin to temporarily re-address the matrix of “what works and what belongs”. It is of course more meaningful to address this matrix by making the film than by arguing, so that we can all relate rather than only calibrate.



III

In terms of spectatorship, with the multi-channel installation no longer do you have a spectator who is bound to be within a closed “diagetic” world [defined by the conversations that take place in it], but rather a mobilized entity moving through the exhibition space negotiating with a multitude of competing images and presentations.

There is now a freedom for the viewer from the disciplined conditions of conventional cinema, since film itself has been released from the single flat, fixed-screen perspective. This could be analogous to the idea, advanced by Roland Barthes in his seminal 1968 essay, of “the death of the author” and the empowerment of the viewer. In your work, especially *The Lightning Testimonies*, there is such a plethora of visual and auditory forms, could it be, as Hal Foster suggests, that “the death of the author” does not necessarily mean “the birth of a reader” so much as the bewilderment of the viewer?

Neither death nor freedom is static. The multi-channel experience and a free viewer is several decades old, and even older is the phenomenon of the author and the reader-viewer who are continuously dying and being reborn. Bewilderment is quite central to this oscillation. What is tossed up will eventually come down but not necessarily in the same place.

When you look around you get the feeling that everybody is actually pursuing the same ambition. Everybody has the same sets of hopes, desires, climaxes, and it’s repetitive, again and again and again and again. You see everyone moving in the same direction, you look aside, and then look back and suddenly discover that the same mass that seemed to be moving in one direction is actually moving in different directions. Sometimes moving together and sometimes moving in different directions. At times it doesn’t make sense, it seems chaotic, it seems crazy, but then slowly if you keep looking you begin to get an inherent feeling about how interconnected it is. You try and understand that relationship and probably in the understanding of the relationship, the interconnection between all these different interconnections, there’s a clue. Maybe there is a sense of understanding. Maybe you advance a little bit and there’s a moment of clarity.

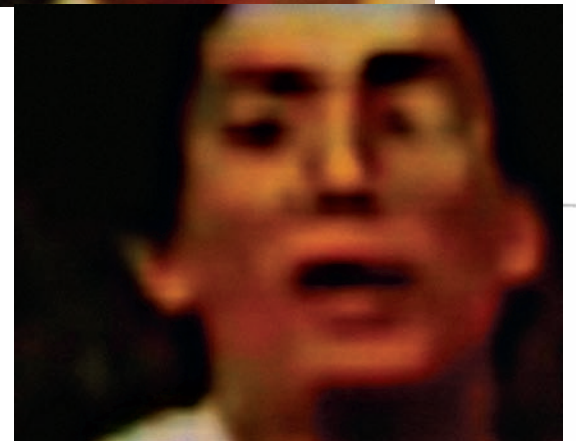
As we all know, when we are struggling with our normal existence and are completely helpless and confused about it, sometimes there is a moment of clarity. When everything becomes simple, you know who you are. You know why you are here. You know what you have to do. It’s for a short period of time. You value it, you love it, you’re happy – and then it goes away again. And it should go away again.

That momentary period, when it becomes all clear and when it all comes together – is it possible to have that in the installation? Could an image installation have many worlds that are identical and symmetrical, then disparate and unsynchronized, then inherently repetitive yet ungraspable, incoherent and alien, but also intimate and loving? And if so then what could happen in there?



I would like to take the liberty of placing a text that I found by chance on the internet after *The Lightning Testimonies* was presented at *Documenta 12* in 2008. The text is from a viewer whose identity I do not know. I add the text here not just because it appreciates and understands my work, but more because it addresses your question in a better way than I could perhaps do. It is given below.

*“The last place I got to was the Neue Galerie. My feet were a bit tired, so I was perfectly happy to sit down in a darkened room to watch an 8-channel video installation. But it wasn’t because of tiredness that I watched 1.5 or so loops of a 32-minute-loop work. I kept watching because it was compelling – because I kept having moments when I realized that for the previous 5 minutes or so, I’d forgotten that ‘I’ existed, so completely was my attention dedicated to the stories being told and intertwined on the 8 screens. The work that did this for me was Amar Kanwar’s *The Lightning Testimonies*. It deals with historical memory and is highly and openly political – perhaps in the best way that history can be, which is to say, a grounded, positioned, and opinionated way. But what it also had – and what, quite frankly, made me stay (NOT the guilt for various colonial and other sins, of which I’d already been fed plenty in one day, nor the sense of duty to stay and learn about yet more atrocities committed by someone somewhere) – was the fact that it was visually rich and complex and stunning, made in a way that allowed heteroglossia to introduce clarity rather than confusion. It was deeply upsetting and yet cathartic and it contained a little something I like to call ‘narrative’, which seems, if my experiences of the last 3 years are any indication, to be often an endangered species where art curatorial practice is concerned.”*



IV

The spatio-temporal condition of film in the art space raises the question of distraction. It has been queried how multi-channel installations can engage viewers from distraction without simply being or reconstructing a distraction, and how they can retain their own criticality and ability to be provoking attention to distraction without falling prey to contemplative immersion. I think in *The Lightning Testimonies*, at the moment when it shifts from 8-channel to single-channel in the 21st minute of the loop, there is what Peter Osborne suggests “one task of appreciation” in the degree to which a multi-channel installation exposes “new reflective rhythms of absorption and distraction, new articulations of duration”.

The question of distraction doesn't emerge only from film being in an art space. It needs to be addressed in the original conception, in the way you see, shoot, and edit. It also lies in the choice of image, the composition, the magnification, and even the transitions in magnifications, and of course most certainly in the duration of a shot.

Over a period of time filmmakers can become highly skilled “maestros of distraction”, deliberately done or subconsciously manufactured. The process begins even before you enter any space of display. Hence the debate first lies at the stage of creating and editing, and the process of un-learning, if it at all has to take place, starts there or even before in the phase of preparation.

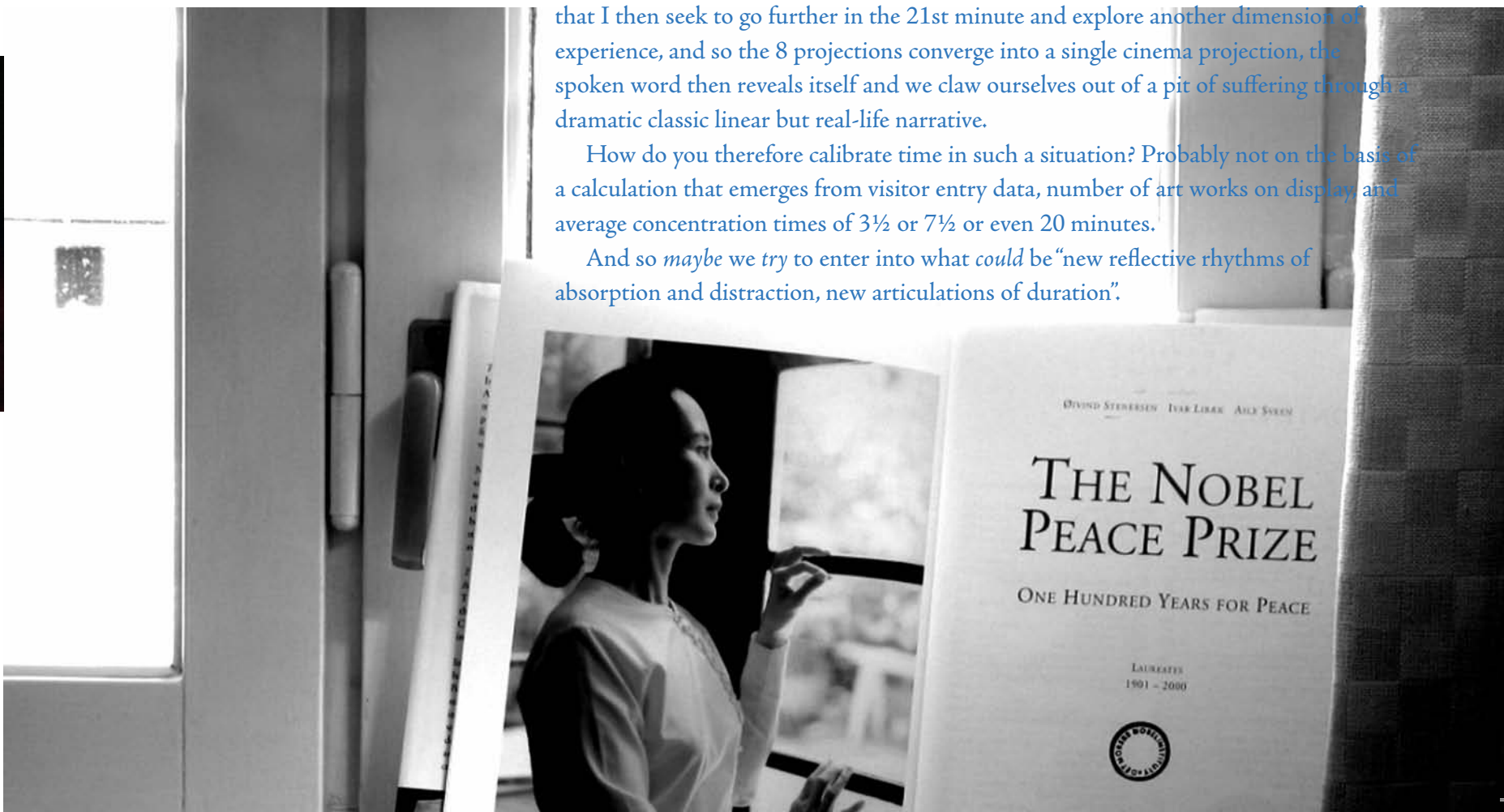
During the research and making of *The Lightning Testimonies*, I was constantly faced with this dilemma of “distraction” and “immersion”. It can surface even within a single shot or in a pair. Through the filmmaking process I was constantly walking on an incredibly thin line drawn on water. This very specific consciousness of the *attempt* to see, to think, to look beyond, is unhesitatingly made explicit in several ways within the film and shared openly with the viewer. That is why we, that is you and I, are not two separate entities trapped on either side of a cinematic device.

The Lightning Testimonies is – briefly stated – multiple narratives in the realm of sexual violence that have occurred in public and political conflicts in the subcontinent in a span of 60 years. Flowing within and between 8 projections is an attempt to understand the archiving of pain and memory accompanied by an attempted articulation of the unsaid. I try to create a *possible preparation*, an experience, so as to enable a multiple understanding of the meaning of dignity.

Here every image seems to contain a certain time, every time seems to be different and yet interconnected. It is within this constant swirling of time, image, and sound that I then seek to go further in the 21st minute and explore another dimension of experience, and so the 8 projections converge into a single cinema projection, the spoken word then reveals itself and we claw ourselves out of a pit of suffering through a dramatic classic linear but real-life narrative.

How do you therefore calibrate time in such a situation? Probably not on the basis of a calculation that emerges from visitor entry data, number of art works on display, and average concentration times of 3½ or 7½ or even 20 minutes.

And so *maybe* we try to enter into what *could* be “new reflective rhythms of absorption and distraction, new articulations of duration”.





The next morning Senior General Than Shwe Supreme Head of the Burmese Military Dictatorship visited the cremation mem



Memorial site of Mahatma Gandhi in New Delhi to pay his respects. The Burmese dictator laid a wreath and offered rose petals.



V

By virtue of being multi-channel installations *The Lightning Testimonies* and *The Torn First Pages* do not allow a viewer a linear time axis to follow the order of an organized narrative. Instead there is an apparent spatialization of duration; “by provoking different forms of dramatization, which in turn create different modes of empathy on the part of the spectator, the aim is to give another time, which for a given instant is capable of upsetting the implacable homogeneity, the regularity and succession of our own”. Is this a new possible space, which has been created, that resists the standardization of time; is this an archive of lived feelings?

The Lightning Testimonies could be an archive of lived feelings and it does create another terrain of times as I mentioned earlier, but perhaps it is *The Torn First Pages*, with its 19 projections on pieces of paper, that tries to explore this in a more obvious way.

The Torn First Pages, a video installation in three parts was completed in 2008 and was presented in honour of the Burmese bookshop owner Ko Than Htay, who was imprisoned for “tearing out the first page” of all books and journals that he sold and which contained ideological slogans from the military regime. What Ko Than Htay did was very simple but it was an act of great courage. He was not a member of any political party. He was a bookshop owner and he opposed the military regime as an ordinary individual in his own unique, anonymous, and personal way. *The Torn First Pages* was also an ode to the thousands engaged in the struggle for democracy in Burma.

This was also the first time I was able to present a moving image installation with several projections that actively engaged with a three dimensional space. The projections in Part One were distinct, autonomous and interconnected but clearly presented five different times with their own obvious trajectories and patterns of the movement of time. Part Two opened up a single zone within which multiple times flowed, within which the said and unsaid were projected together and within which time also shot off unexpectedly on a tangent. With sparse and intense fragments the multiple passage of times creates a grand narrative within which we can all find ourselves. Part Three presented the process of the archiving and display of the past.

I would tend to agree that there is a relationship (and a fascinating one it is) between the “spatialization of duration” and different modes of empathy. However I would add two points to this discussion.

First – The creation of “another time” can also occur within a single projection film, and a multiple-channel installation is not necessarily required. I have seen many films that create such an experience. In the context of my own work, I had, in 2001, constructed a question and attempted an answer through a single-channel film. The question was – Is it possible to understand the passage of time through poetry, and if it were possible even for one instant “to place one’s finger on the passage of time” then would it also be possible to see the future, even if it is to be a momentary glimpse? Exploring the answer to this self-made question led me to record and film poetry in several languages of the subcontinent on a series of travels that came together in *A Night of Prophecy*. It was first presented at *Documenta 11* in the cinema programme and has since been screened in various spaces as a single projection.

Second – The objective is not to *only* create “another time”. In the context of installations it is possibly more interesting to examine the potential of image and sound to create what I would call “a heightened perception of the simultaneous passage of multiple time”. This could lead us to asking what is multiple time? as well as What is the meaning of “passage”? apart from What “happens” when they are experienced together?”

In this discussion it could be briefly said that it appears that multiple time exists all around us and within each one of us and it has different directions and patterns of movement. It can be seen/perceived separately in different planes, though it is more difficult to see/perceive it in the same plane or a single moment. At times it appears that to be able to see/experience the passage of multiple time through a single moment creates an incredible probability of the “understanding” of oneself and the outside world. This “understanding” is perhaps even more interesting as it appears to occur at several levels. A “certain comprehension” creates a “certain compassion” that creates a “certain comprehension”, and so on.



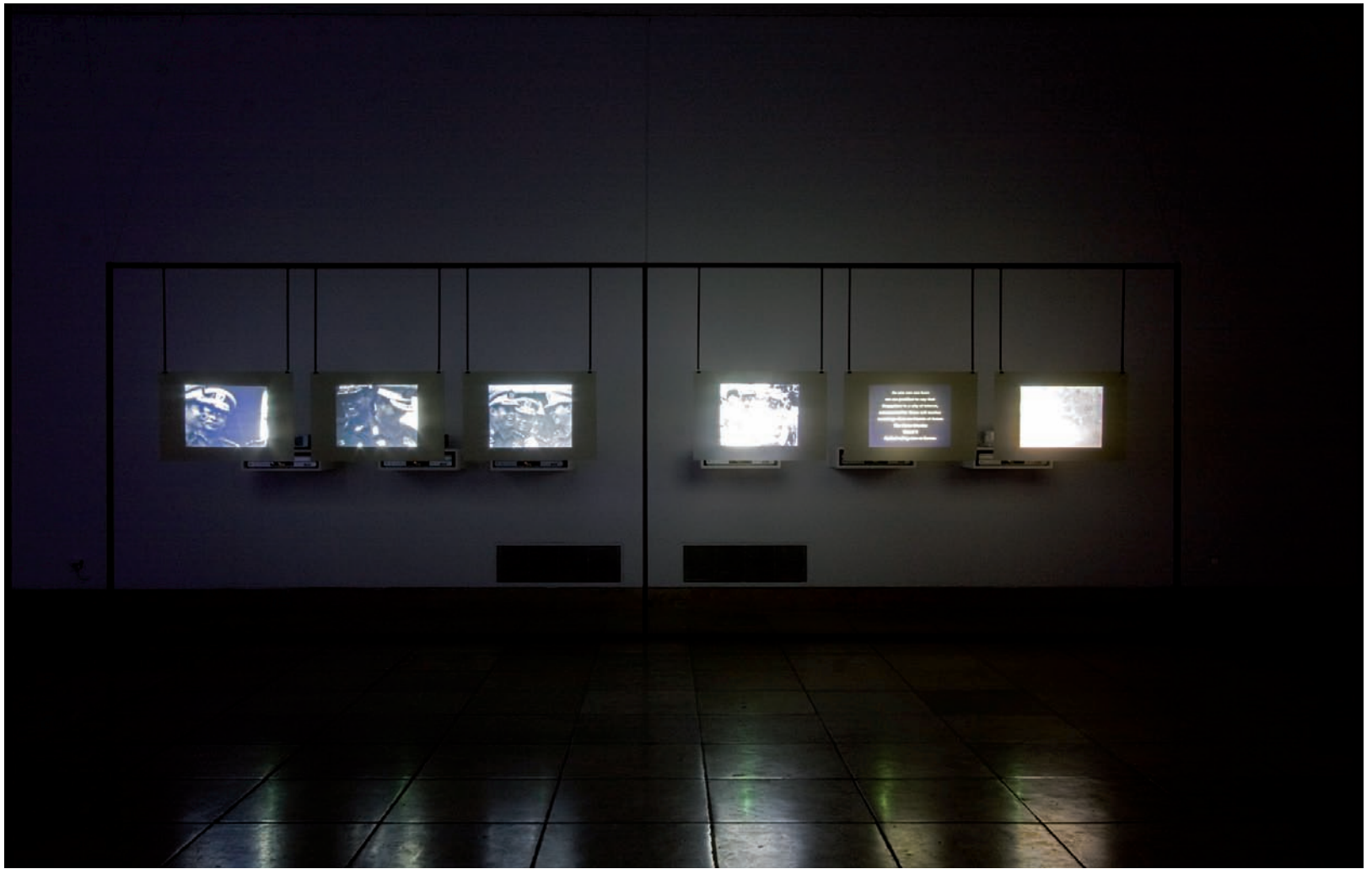


VI

Now on to a provisional conclusion, throwing open the scope of this conversation to beyond your own practice, in a hope to engage with a concern at large. I freely poach a question to propose to you, from the esteemed French film critic Raymond Bellour: “what is a critic to do” now that cinema is “redistributed, transformed, mimicked, and reinstalled”?

The mass production and consumption of the spectacle is not only a problem of cinema but also of the gallery and actually for almost everywhere. Is it not true that all life, all relationships, all transactions *seem* to be “redistributed, transformed, mimicked, and reinstalled” What does one do then? The answer to this question does not lie only within the realm of the aesthetics and grammar of cinema. The answer probably is to keep finding a way to live, to confront and to resist, and to nurture and to continuously create as you go along.





NOTES

- 1 See Geeta Kapur, "Tracking", in *Indian Highway Catalogue*, The Serpentine Gallery, London; Koenig Books, 2008, p. 188.
- 2 See Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, New York; Hill and Wang, 1978.
- 3 See Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, and Yve-Alain Bois, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, London; Thames & Hudson, 2005, open citation.
- 4 Peter Osborne, "Distracted Reception: Time, Art and Technology", in *Time Zones*, exhibition catalogue, Tata Modern, London, 2005, open citations, pp. 66–75.
- 5 Jean-Christophe Royoux, "Toward a Post-Cinematic Space-Time (From an Ongoing Inventory)", in *Black Box Illuminated*, IASPIS Prospectus, Stockholm; 2003, pp. 112.
- 6 Raymond Bellour, 'La querelle des dispositifs/Battle of the images', *Art Press*, No.262 (November 2000), pp. 48–52.

