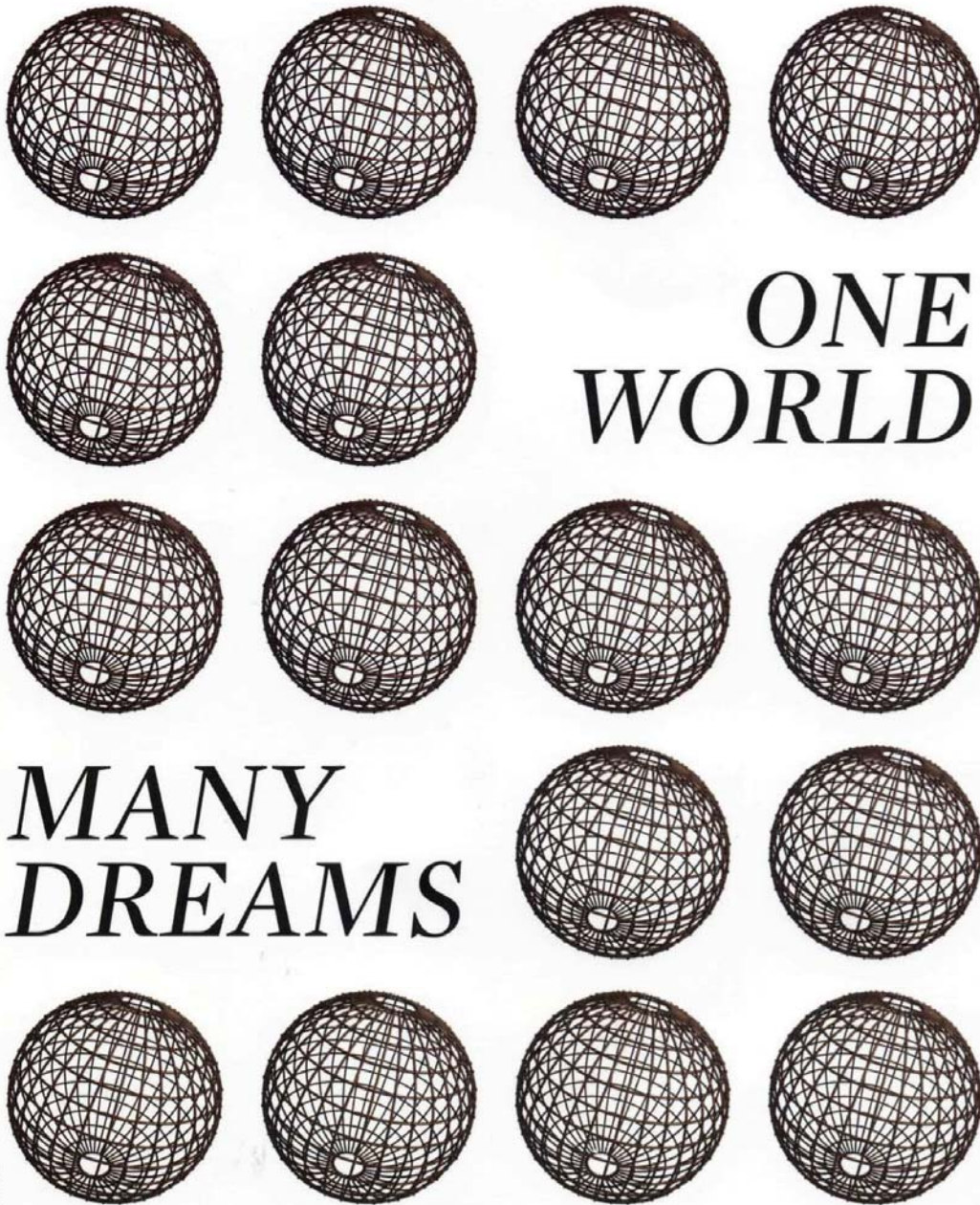


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ONE
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*Pre-Olympian Beijing / Mona Hatoum / Amar Kanwar
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(All Images This Page)
A SEASON OUTSIDE
1997. Photo still from
single channel video installation,
color, 30 min. Courtesy
the artist and Galerie Marian
Goodman, Paris.



AMAR KANWAR

THE COMPASS THAT KEEPS SPINNING

A unique filmmaker adds his political conscience to India's booming art scene, and the world takes notice.



Amar Kanwar. Courtesy the artist.

By Devika Singh

In Amar Kanwar's *A Season Outside* (1998), two white arrows drawn on an asphalt road point to what is referred to in the film's voice-over as the "12-inch mythical line" that separates India and Pakistan. This is the Wagah border in Punjab, a famous crossing point between the two countries. Kanwar's camera first focuses on the perfectly symmetrical movements of the coolies who approach each other to exchange heavy bundles of goods. Following this, the barriers close again and the soldiers on either side engage in a form of competitive, quasi-grotesque military choreography during the lowering of their respective flags. Subsequent shots draw us into Punjab's interior, the theater of gruesome violence during Partition and scenes of Sikh fundamentalists preaching. Shots of a moving train remind viewers of the infamous killings that took place in the trains that crossed the India-Pakistan border during the mass migration that followed independence in 1947.

These images introduced Amar Kanwar, a Delhi-based filmmaker now in his mid-40s, to the art world when *A Season Outside* (the first of a trilogy of films on post-independence India) was included in documenta11 in 2002. Last year, Kanwar



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brought an eight-channel installation entitled *The Lightning Testimonies* (2007), a complex work that deals with crimes committed against women in India and Bangladesh since 1947, to documenta12. While Kanwar's films have been screened at a number of prestigious international institutions in the past six years, the single-channel, two-hour long Hindi version of *The Lightning Testimonies* premiered in February at a women's college in Allahabad, and is currently touring a number of off-the-artistic-circuit venues in India.

Although some artists can be exceedingly meticulous about the installation of their works, Kanwar's laissez-faire begs the question of how to engage critically with his films. "Whatever I do emerges from the Subcontinent, and it is necessary and important that it is shown extensively in the region that it comes from. Space doesn't bother me," he told *ArtAsiaPacific*. Visually, his films oscillate between abstract tableaux in motion and traditional narrative structure. Laying between documentary film and visual essay, Kanwar's productions straddle several artistic and non-artistic genres. Likewise, the reception of his work, at home and abroad, has been twofold, with a stress on the documentary aspect in India, where the issues Kanwar deals with are more familiar. For example, *A Season Outside* earned both the Golden Conch at the Mumbai International Documentary Film Festival in 1998 and inclusion in the collection of Miami's Margulies family, known as taste-makers in contemporary art.

Kanwar trained in filmmaking at the Mass Communication Research Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia University, in Delhi from 1985 to 1987. Shortly before, the riots that followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi and a disastrous gas leak at



(Top Left and Center)
THE LIGHTNING TESTIMONIES, 2007. 8 channel video installation, color, sound, 32 min 31 sec. Photo by Katrin Guntershausen. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Marian Goodman, Paris.

(Below)
A NIGHT OF PROPHECY, 2002. Photo still from single channel video installation, color, 77 min. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Marian Goodman, Paris.





the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal in 1984 spurred him to actively engage with social issues. Together, his films occupy marginal spaces of the contemporary Indian imaginary landscape that remain central to its history: whether the conflict over Kashmir, separatist Punjab or the Naxalite (Indian Maoist) guerrilla movements. In the voice-over of *A Season Outside*, Kanwar says that he has “a compass which keeps on spinning [him] into zones of conflict.” Most of these places fall under martial law and form the background for the unsettling acts of violence that Kanwar denounces.

A Night of Prophecy (2002) was conceived as the sequel to *A Season Outside*. This mesmerizing succession of songs and poems that tell stories of oppression and imagined rebellion leads the viewer on an oneiric journey from Mumbai to the northeast, finally stopping in the Kashmiri mountains. The chanting soundtrack includes the pulsating voice of a man living under Dadar bridge in Mumbai who relates the gripping story of his prostitute mother, and the raucous rallying cry of a lower-caste man from Andhra Pradesh inviting his peers to “pick up the club.” While the singing takes us deep into these characters’ psyches, single-frame images of the grass-root performers act as a mere visual support; language alone serves as a catalyst to this lyric travelogue. Yet in the second half of the 77-minute-long film, the rhythm slows and jeopardizes the raw power of the first half, as Kanwar shifts from deeply personal testimonies to a Nagaland choir performing in English and finally the reciting of poised, erudite Kashmiri poetry.



Kanwar filmed the final work of the trilogy, *To Remember* (2003), at Birla House in Delhi, where Gandhi was assassinated and which is now a museum. The silent film premiered in Gujarat in 2003 on the anniversary of Gandhi’s assassination and shortly after the re-election of Narendra Modi, under whom large-scale massacres of Muslims were orchestrated throughout Gujarat in early 2002. The film confronts the present with history: shots of the dusty, old-fashioned museum replete with odd memorabilia of Gandhi are juxtaposed against footage from the 2002 attacks. The film first follows the museum visitors, whose bodies are reflected in the display windows, and then leads into the garden where Gandhi was shot.

There, Kanwar’s camera focuses on the last footsteps of the Mahatma that were commemoratively cast in cement on the lawn. A pervading morbidness together with the film’s silence reinforces Kanwar’s dark comment on the legacy of Gandhi’s teaching on non-violence. The trilogy is a palimpsest of India’s deep-rooted social and political problems—from inter-caste violence to religious bigotry—that gained momentum during Partition and continue to this day.

Kanwar’s focus on the spiraling, interconnected nature of events is a strength but also a danger in his output, which tends to lump together disparate issues. Even Tibetan refugee camps make an appearance in *A Season Outside*, which was commissioned by the Dalai Lama’s Foundation for Universal Responsibility as a film on non-violence. In this sense, Kanwar’s



(Above, All Images)
THE LIGHTNING TESTIMONIES 2007,
8 channel video installation, color, sound, 32 min 31 sec. Photo by Katrin Guntenshausen. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Marian Goodman, Paris.

(Left)
TO REMEMBER,
2003. Video, 8 min. Courtesy the artist.

most challenging work to date is *The Lightning Testimonies*, in which India's ailments seem to find a formal resolution. It also marks a turn towards large-scale production; the installation was supported by the Ford Foundation and Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, a philanthropic art institution in Vienna.

In this half-hour-long, eight-channel film cycle, Kanwar depicts violence committed against women throughout the Subcontinent, from the rape of a woman by an Indian soldier in one of Nagaland's many churches to the work carried out by activist Mridula Sarabhai in the late 1940s and 1950s to recover women abducted during Partition. The stories are interwoven through still-life shots of locations and objects that become the repositories of these testimonies. Among these is the intimate

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courtyard of a house, a beautiful blue-glazed window and a red patterned Manipuri shawl, filmed in close-up. But the most poignant image is that of the shrine made of clay pots and built by *Adivasis* (Indian tribal people) in a forest to commemorate an assault committed against a Muslim woman on that location. Ultimately *The Lightning Testimonies* deals with the working of personal and collective memory by questioning the healing power of speech and the commemorative value of space and image. "In a way I was trying to think about exploring and understanding images differently; an image that contains [meaning] and one that doesn't," comments Kanwar. The cycle concludes with footage of a performance based on the short story *Draupadi* (1978), written by author and activist Mahasweta Devi, with all other screens blacked out. As in the stories that precede it in *The Lightning Testimonies*, the play deals with rape and assault and ends when the female performer strips in front of a man dressed as an Indian soldier and throws her clothes over him in a strangely empowering and aggressive gesture.

Kanwar's current work in progress on Myanmar, entitled *The Torn First Pages* in reference to the ideological slogans inserted in the first pages of all publications there, will premiere in September to coincide with the first anniversary of the 2007 uprising of Buddhist monks against the country's ruling military junta. When complete, this ensemble will comprise eight films shot in India, Bangladesh, Norway and the US, plus archival material secretly filmed in Myanmar. Kanwar was already following the Burmese resistance when General Than Shwe, head of the ruling junta, came to Delhi in 2004 and visited the



site where Gandhi was cremated. Kanwar's outrage at India's realpolitik in South Asia—it is one of the few countries to recognize Myanmar's government—is in line with the sensibility that marks his previous work and with his desire to engage South Asian, rather than merely Indian, issues. Footage of Than Swe's visit became the subject of a short video entitled *The Face* (2005), part of the "Portrait" subgroup of *The Torn First Pages*, which shows the general throwing rose petals on Gandhi's memorial. Gradually, Kanwar accelerates the repetitive gesture until it becomes an absurd ritual.

Although *The Face* revolves around a rather simple visual mechanism, the formally innovative *Thet Win Aung* (2005) and *Ma Win Maw Oo* (2005), also part of the "Portrait" series, initiate a new phase in Kanwar's relation to image-making. These films pay homage to two Burmese citizens killed by the dictatorship, and are short, concise and experimental visual meditations centered on photographic representations of the eponymous subjects, Thet Win Aung and Ma Win Maw Oo. About *Thet Win Aung*, Kanwar told AAP that he "wanted to explore a universe in a single frame." 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, who was condemned in 1998 to 59 years in prison for organizing student protests since 1988 and who died in prison in 2006, 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





(Center and Top Right)
THET WIN AUNG, 2005.
 Photo still from single
 channel video installation,
 color, 3 min 40 sec. Courtesy
 the artist and Galerie
 Marian Goodman, Paris.

(Below and Bottom Right)
MA WIN MAW OO,
 2005. Photo still from single
 channel video installation,
 color, 4 min 44 sec. Courtesy
 the artist and Galerie
 Marian Goodman, Paris.

(Opposite)
THE FACE, 2007.
 Video still. Courtesy the artist.



and orange hues invade the screen and then recede to reveal two medical students trying to rescue the 13-year old girl shot by the military during a 1988 demonstration. 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.

Whereas documentary filmmaking demands that the filmmaker step back, listen and record, Kanwar, through recurrent voice-overs and first-person commentary-like subtitles, is 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. While other Indian documentary filmmakers deal with similar themes, he is the first to be screened in an international art context. The overt historical and political dimension of his work sets him apart from much of Indian contemporary art in which politics are often dealt with in a sarcastic or frankly humorous way. The repressed pages of India's collective memory form the stuff of Kanwar's work: these are raw, occasionally blurred and at times difficult to digest. This backward mechanism, punctuated by moments of visual bliss, paradoxically provokes a sense of urgency and shared responsibility that makes not only the issues with which Kanwar is concerned but also the work itself a matter of necessary engagement.

Amar Kanwar's *The Lightning Testimonies* is on view at Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna, through September 21 and at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand, through August 31. Kanwar's work is also slated to open at Haus der Kunst, Munich, and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, at the end of September.

