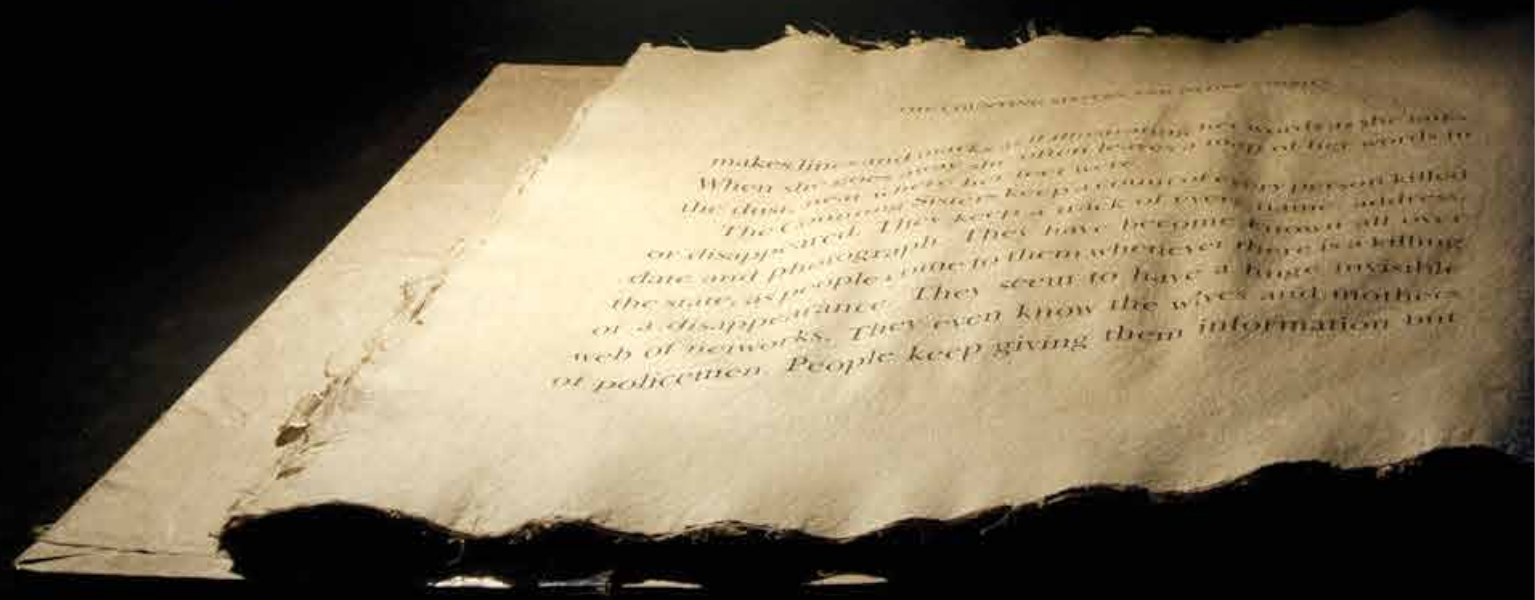


# AESTHETICS IS A WAY OF BEING, IT HAS MULTIPLE VOCABULARIES

Ina Puri in an insightful conversation with **Amar Kanwar**





**I.P:** It has been said that your approach is more concerned with the politics of aesthetics rather than the aesthetics of politics. Each body of work mirrors society's myriad ethic, ecological, historical and philosophical dilemmas in depth provoking commentary but never violence or aggression. Would you agree?

**A.K:** I am more concerned with doubt, disturbances and the hope for temporary insights. I am concerned with intentions too. Felt, stated, desired, hidden, unknown intentions. Each of these spiral into a series of questions that is specific to its own category. Each answer is different from the other and from itself every few minutes. I am concerned with this fluid repeating ethical crippling crisis and because of it the accompanying attempts at resolutions. Each resolution is the search for a language, a way to speak. I am concerned with the sharing of these attempts. In such a situation where one is often responding almost continuously to multiple forms of aggression it is hard to be aggressive or provoke violence in response.

**I.P:** Retrospecting your oeuvre there is a recurring sense of wonder at the images...the leaf swaying to unheard melody, melancholic skies, pouring rain that drenches the earth in some films. You revisit Apu's wonder-struck eyes for instance as he sees the train approach, for the first time in his life. Does beauty not create distractions? Seduce? Tempt you to linger longer on images than you would otherwise?

**A.K:** In 2011, in Yamagata, Japan, I saw an old man walk carefully through the aisle of the auditorium. In real time that seemed like slow motion he climbed up the steps onto

the stage, turned, sat down on a chair and crossed his legs. There was a quiet grace in all his movements. His face was gentle and very creased. He seemed normally respectful of the respect he was getting. He spoke carefully, softly but also casually to the audience. In a few minutes he said in reply to a question, "I couldn't handle machines at all. I didn't even know which way to turn a screwdriver. Mechanically I was totally tone-deaf." Many in the audience smiled at this remark. It took me a while before I understood why. This was Otsu Koshiro, ace cinematographer in a dark handsome oversized jacket that hid what I think was a very frail body. I have never forgotten his face ever since. I have never forgotten another face that I saw just a few minutes later in the same hall. The lights went out, the projector came on and Alexander Sokurov's 61 minute film *Dolce* began flickering on the screen through the eyes of Otsu Koshiro's camera. Any description would be inadequate of the emotional terrain of this film. A woman, a widow, a mother alone in a house with her differently abled daughter on a solitary Japanese island in the middle of the ocean. Then at a certain moment, well into the story, past many thresholds of sorrow and introspection and after what seemed like quite a long time of dreaming and holding your breath, the woman looks out of the window. And it rains. You see her face, eyes almost shut and the silver black and white drops of rain bounce and explode like stars on the windowsill across her silent face, across the silence of her entire life. And then you realize that you understand. In a few moments her face and everything that she hadn't ever said gets etched in your body, eyes and mind forever.

We all search for those few moments. Sometimes we get close, often we pass it by and once in a while we find it and stay within it.

Every question leads you to another question. Is all existence a series of distractions? Is concentration nothing but attempts at self-awareness? Is the oscillation between concentration and distraction the essence of all meaning? Which seduction is valid and which unacceptable? And so have we now returned back to the question of intention?

**I.P:** "There are some aspects of human life that can only be faithfully represented through poetry. But this is where directors very often try to use clumsy, conventional gimmickry instead of poetic logic. I'm thinking of the illusionism and extraordinary effects involved in dreams, memories and fantasies..." Would you agree with Tarkovsky's views?

**A.K:** It's hard to disagree with him; there is a very thin line between something very beautiful and something not so at all. Though he must have been quite exasperated to have to say that. It is enough to see his films to understand. But yes it is true. With words you can cast any spell, if you sing them out beautifully you can open anyone's heart and if you play music you've created a passage that is filled with many magical powers. If you add an object to this you mark the physical space where revelations are destined to occur. And if a face appears suddenly then an endless story begins.

Dreams are like story boats in a silver blue ocean. With uncertain origins and secret destinations but always with a reference to the coast. Often these boats crisscross each other making invisible water maps that we unknowingly follow endlessly. Then sometimes they sink to the bottom of the sea and become memories. And then times passes. And it's only the traces that remain perceptible. And then? Then arises the inability to continue any further without sinking, without searching for that which you cannot now see, is unsaid, submerged. So if you continue further which vocabulary is then discovered, which more appropriate for the recalling of memory, for living any further? This inability is central to my work.

Almost every film I have made recently is as much about the subject as it is about trying to express. The Burmese democracy movement for instance. What happened in the last five decades? Even now more has been unsaid than what has been expressed, regardless of the recent changes and the huge outpouring of resistance. It is too hard to speak. At times one does not even know how to speak. In the multiple projection film installation *The Torn First Pages* the only way forward for me was to experience and make a request upfront - *'Imagine nineteen sheets of paper floating forever in the wind. Imagine the simultaneous viewing of multiple time. Of obvious time, hyper time, orphaned time. Time that unexpectedly shoots off from beneath your feet and races away. Time parallel and co-existing in two geographical memories. One sinking roots, the other a smoke-wisp attached to and forever trailing a body. Imagine time that is filled with as many silences as with words. Imagine the slow gathering*

*together of time. Moment by moment. Evidence by evidence. Imagine the formal presentation of poetry as evidence in a future war crimes tribunal.'*

In *The Sovereign Forest*, I am perhaps a bit more direct. Framed in another context but exactly the same point of view. Let us examine a crime. Let us examine all forms of evidence with the causes and patterns of the crime. Legally valid evidence is inadequate to understand the meaning, extent and scale of the crime. Poetry seems essential to comprehend a series of simultaneous disappearances occurring across multiple dimensions. A more dynamic relationship and insight is needed. Let us first look, even before we analyse. Let us present it. And then let us address its inadequacy and give out a call for a new constellation of evidence and see what happens. And see what logic and alphabets, does that language have?

**I.P:** You, Amar Kanwar, have created an archive of works that have focused intently on social issues. The visual language and poetics engage both activists and aesthetes yet the issues remain, society doesn't change or even care. Sajjan Kumar one of the prime accused of the 1984 anti Sikh killings walks a free man. In the fabric of your visual narrative runs a thread that suggests that the story has no conclusion....it is a chapter merely, history will repeat itself and as witnesses we shall see it recur in our lifetime. The 1984 riots have no closure; the sexual predators continue to prey upon innocent victims. Subjects you have dealt with so long in the past remain relevant in modern times but have we as a society chosen not to listen anymore?

**A.K:** It is true that the 1984 anti Sikh massacres destroyed many lives. It is also true that many of those responsible are free and protected. And a difficult fact to accept is that protestors did not surround the Indian parliament indefinitely till the guilty were arrested. But it is also true that many people committed their lives to fighting this injustice after 1984. There are thousands who have learnt to fight and moved faster and stayed on fighting till today after the anti Muslim massacres in Gujarat in 2002. Police officers in Gujarat today are being arrested or absconding. Politicians there have to constantly work overtime covering their tracks. The public disrobing by twelve Manipuri mothers in front of the gates of the Army Headquarters in Imphal in 2004 was not a meaningless act. It was by far the most powerful anti rape protest we have ever seen in this country. The thousands of students and citizens who confronted the parliament and the police after the sexual violence and killing of a young girl in Delhi in December 2012 was not a random coincidence. Marital rape is almost on the edge of being publically spoken about. More

women are confronting at every possible opportunity. The regime of impunity created by the Armed Forces Special Powers Act in the North East and Kashmir is challenged every day from many positions. These are all inter-related events and possibilities. Nothing is futile. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 2013, more than thirty years after the massacre, the former Guatemalan dictator Efraim Rios Montt was convicted of genocide after a court found him guilty of crimes against humanity for his role in the slaughter of 1,771 Mayan Ixils in the 1980s. He was sentenced to 80 years in prison. It is the first time ever that a former head of state had been found guilty of genocide in their own country. Within a week the verdict was over turned and re trial ordered. But they fought for 30 years and they will continue to push for justice even in the retrial. There is a huge upheaval taking place in India even as we speak, and it's happening regardless of us. What is happening in Kashmir at this moment will surface in our face quite soon but in the meanwhile perhaps this email that I received a few months ago will answer your question better than me.

*Dear Friends,*

*In the mid-night of 9<sup>th</sup> January, 2013 the police filled in two vehicles entered into the Dhinkia Village secretly in order to arrest Mr. Babaji Charan Samantary aged about 65 years, of Dhinkia village in false cases. However, once our villagers became aware about it, they readied for defense. The vehicles went away.*

*Mr. Samantary who worked as postmaster in Dhinkia for 28 years, was suspended on 14/12/2007 on the ground that he was not willing to give his land for the proposed POSCO project. Despite the suspension, Mr. Samantary voluntarily continued his work and delivered the post everyday, for about 7-8 months. However, around July, 2008, the bag of post was not sent, and since then the basic service delivery like post office has been arbitrarily closed in the Dhinkia village and villagers are not receiving any letter to their area.*

*From 9<sup>th</sup> January 2013 evening onwards, the government has deployed 10 platoons of police near to our villages. We came to know that the government is bringing another 8 platoons of police to deploy today.*

*Apprehending the police operation at any time, the villagers are united and erected barricades, refusing entry to outsiders to their village. Both men and women have kept a strict vigil 24x7 and disconnected all the village connecting road to Dhinkia and Govindpur village.*

*Friends, as you know, the National Green Tribunal have put the project on hold on environmental and forest rights ground project on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2012. It is completely illegal on part of the state government to announce resumption of the process at the proposed plant site. But since elections are approaching both*

*the Congress in the centre and BJD in Odisha are trying their best to mobilize election funds which will be held in 2014. At this juncture, we earnestly appeal to all our friends to express the solidarity with our villagers and request our media friends to rush and cover the government's illegal activities from the ground zero.*

*Kindly circulate this mail widely.*

*In Solidarity,  
Prashant Paikary  
(Spokesperson, POSCO Pratirodh Sangram Samiti)*

**I.P:** Like a leitmotif, moments of silence recur, weaving a pattern in your narrative. Time belongs to no particular zone, running on, now revisiting a moment in history, then standing hushed and still, on the threshold of the immediate present. Juxtaposed are nuances of mood, now mellow and serene, then explosive and jarring. How do you plan your film?

**A.K:** I do not have any one way to plan a film. I do not plan moods, moments, graphs of attention etc. or how it's going to be or should be. For me I feel intent powers content. Doubt powers form. For instance when faced with total confusion or nihilism understanding the passage of time seemed to be the only hope. How do you study it? Is it possible to understand the passage of time through poetry and if so, even momentarily then can you predict the future? Often every film project has a set of questions, which I am attempting to resolve, experiment with. How do you film the celebration of brutality? Which image contains oscillating time and which is sterile? How would you know, find, stumble upon it? How to construct a method where structure emerges predominantly by random chance? Can a certain way of looking make irrelevant the hierarchy of images? Etc. etc. At times it's just one single question and sometimes a set of sequential questions. Repeated unsuccessful attempts at answering them open out a form. The nature of the hypothesis or enquiry or dilemma inevitably makes you structure, plan and breathe in a certain way.

**I.P:** The historical content and geographical locale are layers that make your film studies of time, documentaries of events that have impacted our society and communities. Your own role as an activist lends your stories credibility and authentication. When you are planning a project what is the deciding factor? The history and geography of the subject or its wider significance? Have you ever been tempted to explore a realm of pure fantasy? For the sake of pure aesthetics?

**A.K:** What is real for you could be fantastical for me.

Aesthetics is a way of being, it has multiple vocabularies, it is fluid. It is not a fixed language. Its not about choosing, it is about how and why you hone in the way you do, why you embrace it, what you bring to it and so on. These divisions you make actually do not exist. In fact it's a conception that arises either from a certain emotional situation or the need to permanently demarcate territories. Multiple nuclear reactions take place, hydrogen converts



into helium, energy gets released, travels great distances, enters your window through flowing white curtains and forms a beautiful warm patch on the stunningly natural coloured fruit on your table which after a while begins to rot and invisible creatures emerge from within it as it loses shape, colour and itself. Where would you like to locate me in this spectrum of events? Activism can also be about responding to death. Death has many dimensions. When Kumar Gandharv sings the ground below your feet becomes soft. But these feet belong to whom? Worker, clerk, politician, singer, widow, farmer? You can then sink and find yourself through any route you wish to – eternal love, specific love, sudden death, eventual death, real pain, mythical pain, actual histories, imagined histories, pure landscapes, consumed geographies, visible separation or continual alienation - whatever you want. And it is just a song with old words, sung again and again.