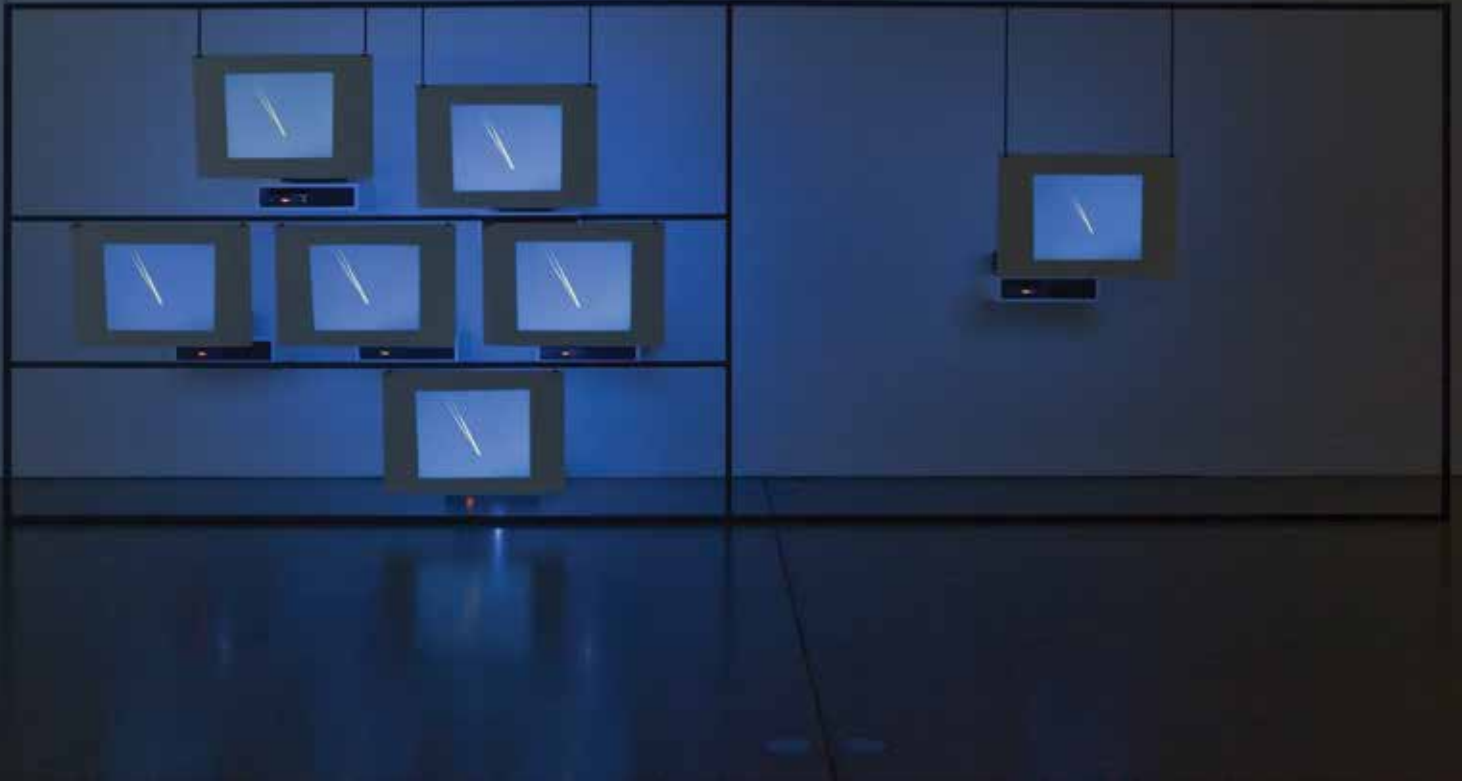




# Embracing Doubt

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**T**HE “DOCUMENT” OF THE DOCUMENTARY HAS FOR LONG BEEN THROWN UP INTO the air. Is illusion more real than fact? What vocabulary is appropriate for a dream? Can a pamphlet be a poem, a poem be the story of a murder, the murder be recalled as a ballad, and the ballad then become an argument? Can the expression of this argument become a vulnerability which negates the argument itself? Would this lead to shifts in our internal positions?

My work has always seemed to be about doubt. Doubt about the method, about my own inadequacies and the repeated experience of losing voice and finding it again. Almost every film would leave me with a conundrum of difficult feelings and questions. Sometimes the absurd expense of the medium while filming issues about poverty would become a crippling contradiction. At another moment even speaking on someone else’s behalf seemed to become incorrect. In the earlier films I would often be confused by expert opinions about the “mind of the common man”, entangled by the aspirations and insecurities of revolutionaries, tossed around by dramatically varied audience responses and occasionally stung by the scornful perhaps deliberate indifference of a few peers. Much later I began to squirm at my own expertise in gaining the trust of participants, the interviewees, the fascinating characters that filled the world around me. But most disturbing was the heightened stress of going out to film motivated by the moral fervour of a particular conception, only to come back with pieces of reality that had a mind of their own, and then having to put the excruciating jigsaw together with the desperate hope that it would

**1 and 2**  
*The Torn First Pages*,  
Amar Kanwar, Haur de Kunst,  
Munich, 2008. Photographs:  
Marino Solokhov.

cohere and receive appreciation. What a waste of time it felt sometimes. Surely there must be another way to do this.

Perhaps the very premise was faulty, coming from some pre-configured route assembled over decades, geographies and histories by champions of the colonial anthropological gaze and the Leninist school of agitation and propaganda. Add to this the distortion of mainstream television channels, the film-festival matrix of what works and what doesn't, and the expectations to represent the charming, beautiful and diverse underbelly of the third world. Sometimes making without fear seems impossible as flavour replaces flavour, anxieties become invisible and the need to earn a living becomes crucial. And then the jigsaw begins all over again.

After Shankar Guha Niyogi's assassination in 1991, there was another set of questions that emerged. I knew the film I made was useful to the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha labour union, then and much later. I also knew immediately that it could have been made much better. Niyogi predicted his assassination, and I was shaken to find that rather than a security guard he wanted a filmmaker to be present. Perhaps to be witness to what would unfold. I was grateful for the union's invitation and for the welcome I received from the most inspiring political mass movement I had ever seen. Beautiful, powerful, vulnerable men and women involved in a unique process of creation and struggle. Almost every shot I took then, 27 years ago, is still imprinted as if straight from the viewfinder into my brain. I had even rolled the camera for long stretches in almost complete darkness as it was heartbreaking to cut just because of low light. Later there was an abiding sense that I had been unable to express much of what I saw, felt and experienced. These were stories that I did not have a vocabulary for. Many of the films I made at that time would leave me with a deep awareness that I had left behind the most important experiences. Perhaps there was another way of looking or comprehending that could create another kind of telling.

"Drop falling in ocean everyone knows, ocean falling in drop, a rare one knows."

"Now listen!" Kabir shouted, "Who calls out your name, is it life or is it death, who calls out your name...."

Here is a selected chronology, skipping several films but following a trajectory of doubts, questions and temporary resolutions. I am deeply grateful to a small group of friends, teachers and professionals who have helped.





1. 1997–98: *Prior to the making of A Season Outside, a film about understanding violence and finding a way to respond*

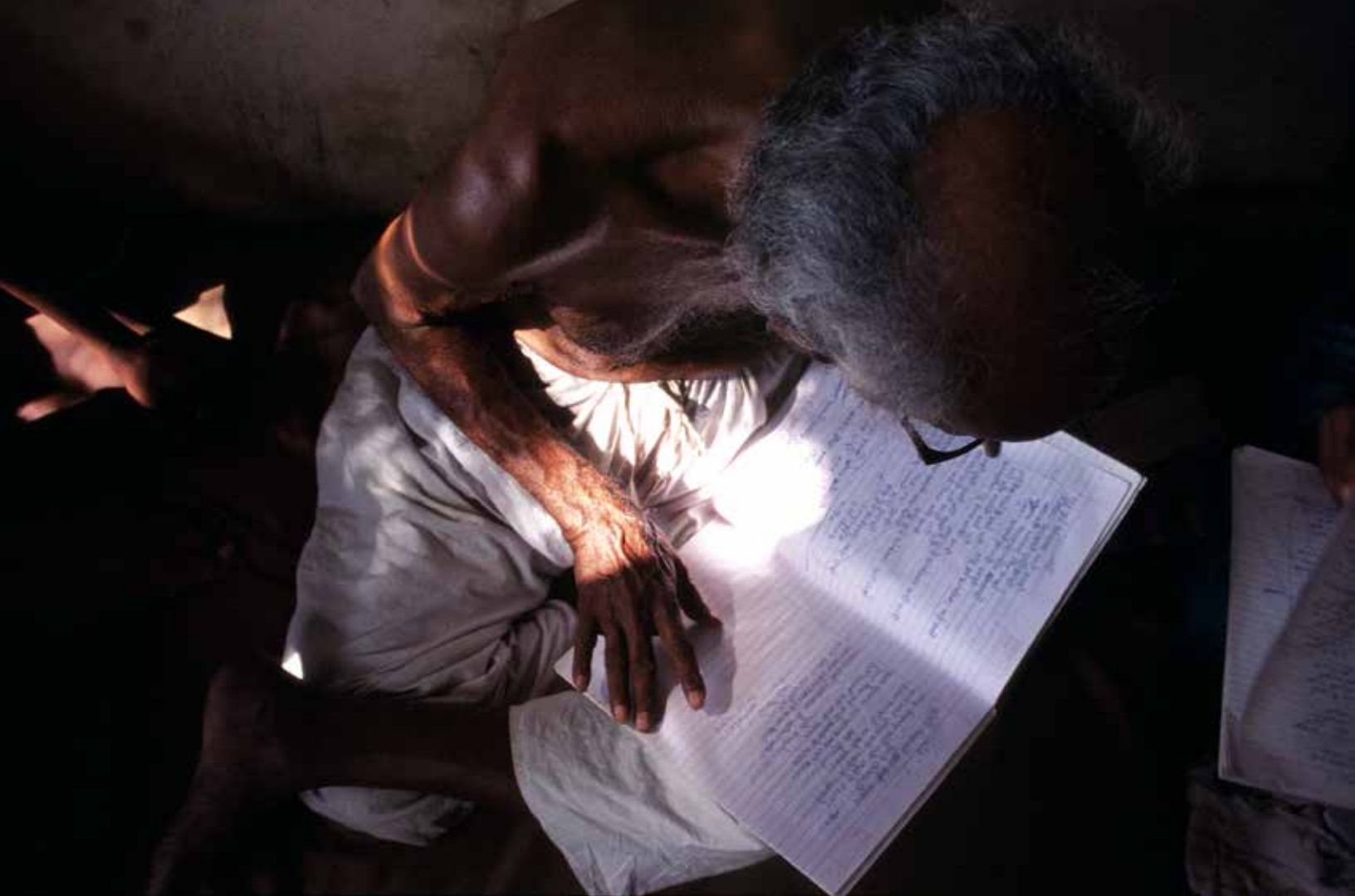
If the author's presence is crafted to be minimal then does it really make the author minimal or is this just a matter of perception? If all thoughts—random, coherent or fragmented but integrated and interconnected—are valid inside my mind then can they also be valid and presented as such in the film? Can I go from my mother to the tree to the politics on the street seamlessly? How can I speak about but not represent the other? Can I film in zones rather than in points of view? What is the difference between research and preparation? Would I see in a particular way if I researched and see in another way if I prepared, would my instincts be different in either case? How to test this out? How best to compare the results? Is there a way to prepare for the unexpected? Is there an unseen line through the centre of the dancer's body? What happens to the audience when she finds it during a performance? If I find meaning then does my audience find meaning too? And is it the same meaning or different for each? And should it be the same or better that it be different?

2. 1997–2002: *Prior to and during the making of Freedom, Baphlimalli 173, The Many Faces of Madness, King of Dreams and finally A Night of Prophecy*

During this period I travelled extensively within India, often alone, researching and then making a set of films about ecological devastation, police repression and the forcible takeover of lands and forests by governments and corporations and local resistances by farmers, fisherfolk and indigenous communities. Briefly I attempted to make a set of films with three distinct intentions—useful for a campaign, for a negotiation with an opponent, and to create a terrain of analysis about political resistance for those with no access to data. I also made another film about masculine sexuality that experimented with compressing several personal narratives into one voice. However these travels filled me with a deeper

5

Still from *A Love Story*,  
Amar Kanwar, 2010.



6 and 7  
Stills from *A Night of Prophecy*,  
Amar Kanwar, 2002.

sense of the extreme inequalities and despair caused by violence generated both by the state and social actors in different regions. I felt everyone was bursting forward with arguments and distinct points of view, an extreme super-articulation seemed to be taking place but no one was really listening to the other. It was from this intractable setting that *A Night of Prophecy* developed, a film that sought to address the faultlines of caste, labour, nationality and self-determination. The film was shot in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Manipur, Nagaland and Kashmir. I had two key questions in mind before I started shooting: Is it possible to understand the passage of time through poetry? And if that were so even momentarily, then would it be possible to see the future? Additionally: Could I use poetry to cut through the super-articulation of ideological positions and prejudices and bring opponents into a zone of comprehension? Would I be able to predict the social/political map of the South Asia of 2040? There were less lofty questions: Why do some images seem sterile and others potent? Could it be because the latter holds a continuously oscillating time? Does such an oscillation of time allow the possibility of multiple interpretations of the image? Another unstated objective was to counter the politics of non-violence earnestly advocated in *A Season Outside*. Counter not necessarily to disagree but to test and confront it with the scale and complexity of the violence that lay in the underbelly of the nation. Was I wrong? The sophisticated and systemic daily violence of untouchability and caste continues to this day. The killings and disappearances continue in Kashmir regardless of the open lessons of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Perhaps we are all destined to a future scenario of cyclical massacres.

3. 2003–07: *Prior to and during the making of To Remember and The Lightning Testimonies* [single-projection and 8-projection installations]

After the sweeping electoral victory of the BJP in Gujarat in 2003, following the Godhra attack and the anti-Muslim riots and killings, it seemed that Gandhi's assassination would need to be commemorated differently. This led to the silent film *To Remember* and also the completion of the trilogy addressing violence: one an essay with spoken prose, the second with 11 languages in poetry, and the third in silence—a formal decision inspired by the *maunvrat* or vow/fast of silence. However the Gujarat riots also threw up another horror: the celebration of brutality, the public spectacle and approbation of sexual violence against Muslim women. How does one respond? How can one talk, show, share anything about this kind of pain? How to not cause survivors and families to revisit the pain while making a film? Several women activists, writers and human rights organizations guided me along the way.

A few key dilemmas from a long list were: How can one identify the gaps in the available narrative? How does one see and represent the different methods of the archiving and recalling of pain? Could there be different images for different kinds of silences? Can a tree, pattern, window be a witness to a crime? How do secrets and testimonies travel, mutate, transform over decades? What is the difference in the nature of comprehension—when time travels chronologically within a narrative and when the viewer has to relate to disparate time but simultaneously? How to tell the process of going along with, through and also beyond the narrative of suffering towards the meaning and strength of resistance? *The Lightning Testimonies* finally included narratives from Punjab, Delhi, Gujarat, Manipur, Nagaland, Maharashtra, Kashmir and Bangladesh from 1947 to 2006.





8  
*The Scene of Crime*,  
Amar Kanwar, documenta13,  
Kassel, 2012. Photograph:  
Henrik Stromberg.

4. 2004–08: *Prior to and during the making of The Torn First Pages [a 19-projection installation that also contains the films The Face, Thet Win Aung, Win Maw Oo, The Bodhi Tree, and Somewhere in May]*

There were many motivations to explore Burma: the strength and charisma of several Burmese activists in exile, embarrassment at my own ignorance about this incredible students' movement, the challenge of understanding a courage that persisted regardless of extreme brutality and terrible personal consequences. Thet Win Aung was a student leader arrested in his early 30s in 1998 and sentenced to 59 years in prison, several spent in solitary confinement. How could I even try and respond to the most terrible of punishments, solitary confinement in prison? What image could possibly represent the meaning of that experience of isolation? And finally, as always, the difficulty of filming a political movement. There were several ethnic communities, nationalities within Burma with varied histories and complex and even contradictory political positions. No single story could even come close to telling the scale and spectrum of this epic struggle. I explored three possible routes of comprehension, comprising three parts of the film installation. The hypothesis that developed may be summed up as follows:

Part 1: What if the viewer were to see time separated in its various forms—in real time, slow time, static time, living time, accelerated time and the time of exile?

Part 2: What would happen if it became possible to experience the passage of multiple moments in time simultaneously? Would the simultaneous experience of the absences and interconnections awaken an enhanced and different ability to comprehend?

Part 3: Archival time—the old older oldest presented alongside the new newer newest



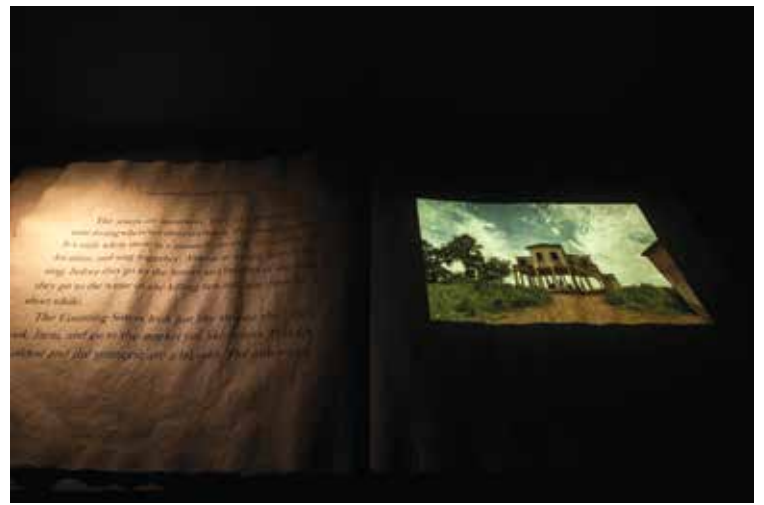
time. Would a heightened sense of the present moment becoming instantaneously and continuously the past, trigger a reactivation of much older archival time, bring it alive in a certain way, make it suddenly part of the present moment? The conclusions of this experiment with time became *The Torn First Pages*. In the process, a certain kind of comprehension that was not explicit in the work emerged. It allowed me to hazard another speculation, of the viability of poetry as evidence in a war-crime tribunal.

5. 2009–12: *Prior to and during the making of A Love Story, The Scene of Crime and The Sovereign Forest*

Can I make a film where there is no defined objective, no subject, the content of the film is unknown on the first day of the first shoot, and so on? Yearning for the zero position is like a free fall, the absence of control can be terrifying. In the momentary delusion of such an aspiration method emerges: making the decision to shoot, for instance, only light in its varied forms, a certain distillation of the image became possible. Black-and-white could be shot in colour, the eye could be prepared to see in a certain way, the human form became distant and the embedding of any narrative became organically possible. In the resulting film, *A Love Story*, it felt as if only in the deep core of separation could one comprehend the meaning of life. In order to enter this core, perhaps, we needed to slip into a state of mind where we could momentarily see the bareness of the image, of human beings, of the inner life of nature. In the interconnected web of this bareness it suddenly became possible to exist, to express. Almost any narrative embedded here would integrate and find resonance.

9  
*The Scene of Crime*, Amar  
Kanwar, TBA-21, Vienna, 2013.  
Photograph: Stephan Wyckoff.





**10**  
Still from *To Remember*,  
Amar Kanwar, 2003.

**11**  
*The Sovereign Forest*, Amar  
Kanwar, Max Mueller Bhavan,  
Mumbai, 2016. Photograph:  
Philippe Caalia.

**12–15 (OPPOSITE)**  
*The Lightning Testimonies*,  
Amar Kanwar, Max Mueller  
Bhavan, Mumbai, 2016–17.  
Photographs: Philippe Caalia.

*A Love Story* opened the door to *The Scene of Crime*. What if I could look without hierarchies? How to practise that? If the concentrated separation of every inhalation and exhalation could create a sense of unity, then could a separation of every glance also dissolve all divisions, integrate every being, trigger a dramatic awareness of our own existence and transform the way we see the world around us? Again an impractical aspiration led to looking carefully at the terrain of the crime rather than the crime and to then film, for instance, every physical movement within it. But for what purpose?

Central to the notion of crime is the question of evidence. All crimes are investigated by police or the criminal justice system. Subsequently, only evidence that is defined as permissible by the law is allowed to be presented in court—all other evidence is dismissed as invalid. The carefully crafted text of the law tells us what is permissible, how to understand and what to conclude. But what happens if a crime continues to occur regardless of the enormous evidence available? Then is the crime invisible or the evidence invisible, or are both visible but not seen? The moment you ask this question a new set of questions emerge. Perhaps we do not comprehend the crime fully. Is legally valid evidence adequate to understand the meaning and extent of a crime? What if the definition of valid evidence is itself incorrect? What is the scene of crime, what is its footprint? Is the crime always a single cataclysmic event or is it an expanding, accumulating process as well? Which vocabulary can adequately comprehend the scale and extent of a crime? If I do not understand the meaning of loss, its scale, its extent, its multiple dimensions, then how could I even know what it is that is lost? Loss must have, it seems, its own unique language. Be it the loss of land, of voice, of life or of freedom.

These were some of the questions that led to *The Sovereign Forest* within which a poetry of multiple forms of evidence were formally presented. Doubt interrogated intent, which created content that in turn triggered form. Many interconnected routes opened into the scene of crime. A deeper sense of the unknown lay in the chance encounters between inner narratives. A constellation of different comprehensions became possible.

