

# Amar Kanwar

*Julia Peyton-Jones, Gunnar Kvaran and Hans Ulrich Obrist interviewed Amar Kanwar in New Delhi in 2008.*

**Amar Kanwar** [b. 1964] is an artist and filmmaker who lives in New Delhi. His eight-screen installation *The Lightning Testimonies* [2007], first shown at Documenta XII in 2007, revisits the history of the Indian subcontinent through multiple narratives of sexual violence against women in political conflicts. “The Torn First Pages” [2003–2008], a 19-channel video work in three parts, is about the Burmese resistance and was premiered at the Haus der Kunst, Munich, in 2008.

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HANS ULRICH OBRIST Let’s start with your installation “The Torn First Pages” [2004–08], which comprises a series of films based on the democracy movement in Burma.

AMAR KANWAR In Burma under the military dictatorship, every published document, be it a magazine or a newspaper or a book of poetry, must have a set of statements released by the dictatorship printed on the first page, and any document published without it is illegal. Some years ago I learned about Ko Htan Htay, a bookshop owner in Mandalay, in Burma, who during the mid-1990s would tear out the first page of every book before he sold it.

HUO A marvelous act of resistance.

AK It’s an incredible thing to do. The risk involved is huge; you and your family could go to jail. The bookshop owner was in his 60s, he had been around for a long time, and he knew what it meant. He did it for quite a few years before the military police discovered it. Then he was arrested, sent to prison, tortured, and released a few years later. When I heard about him I was quite struck by what he had done and also by the fact that it was completely private. It was an act of resistance, yes, but nobody knew he was doing it, except the people who bought the books. It was just something that he felt was necessary. It’s one thing to take on a risk as a political leader, but it’s something else to do it absolutely silently. In some way I felt that I—and maybe anyone who makes, writes, films—owed something to this secret act of courage.

HUO An homage. Is he still alive?

AK Yes, he is. But there was no way to meet him. There are several people who have been arrested simply for giving a radio interview; you can go to prison for years. When I began working on this project in 2004, Burma was not in the news or a dominant issue in the public eye. In order to entangle people with Burma, in a sense, I began to film within Burmese communities in exile, in India, the United States, Norway—

GUNNAR KVARAN Why Norway?

AK I was pursuing many small, almost invisible stories, and a few of them kept linking to Norway. Also in Norway there is only a very small Burmese community, but they have a radio station in Oslo called “The Democratic Voice of Burma” which broadcasts a program in Burmese twice a day into Burma. A lot of these communities of exiled Burmese in resistance are working with radio, and three or four years back I started helping a few of them to start working in film. I can’t teach inside Burma, so I have been working with Burmese in other countries who are building an archive of images filmed secretly. If you look into the military crackdown during the 8888 Revolution—the pro-democracy uprising that took place in August 1988—you won’t find many images. There’s a lot of evidence of what happened, but there are hardly any images of the uprising and of the military attacks on the demonstrators. But in the last, say, three years, there’s been a lot of secret filming inside Burma. The monks uprising, what is also called the Saffron Revolution, which you just saw on your TV a few months ago, and what happened after that, was filmed inside Burma. The footage comes into India and Thailand for instance and then goes on to different parts of the world. “The Torn First Pages” is actually a combination of my homage to the bookshop owner and to this kind of work that is done by anonymous people, cameramen and camerawomen who would be arrested if they were identified. If you look at the images they have taken over the last fifteen years, this growing body of evidence, you begin to see a pattern in the way in which images are collected, saved and documented. It’s almost as if it’s for a future tribunal. You collect evidence only if you have hope. There is no point otherwise.

HUO The idea is that one day there would be a tribunal.

AK Yes, there has to be. One of the films in “The Torn First Pages” series, *Ma Win Maw Oo*, is about a photograph that disappeared from public memory. August 8, 1988, was one of the key days of the student resistance in Burma; the revolution’s name comes from that date, 8/8/88. This was a time when parents were telling their children to go out and demonstrate against the military, and on the eighth of August a girl, twelve or thirteen years old, was in the crowd, part of the student demonstrations, when the military opened fire. Many

students were killed, and this young girl named *Win Maw Oo* was shot dead. One photograph was taken of her being carried away, seconds after she was shot; it was published worldwide, as a news photograph of unrest in a country, and then it got lost from view, in a sense.

HUO There is a collective amnesia.

AK Yes. For me that photograph was iconic. In many ways the significance of the student movement in Burma, in terms of its duration, its breadth, its sacrifice, hasn’t really been understood. You need to see it with reference to 1968, Vietnam, South Africa or Tiananmen. It’s been a huge struggle for five decades. So just like you have iconic images that have remained in public memory from these other places, this was one image that I felt was representative of what happened. It somehow contained more than what you see. Presently, the majority of people in exile are the generation of 1988, the kids that went out to demonstrate one day and never returned home. When the military crackdown and violence started, they escaped, and then waited for the situation to cool down, but it never did.

HUO We spoke this morning with the environmentalist artist Ravi Agarwal about the production of reality and at what point documentary work actually produces change. Do you see your films as effective in this way?

AK Yes, they are part of the process of change, but beyond the specific subjects or issues that I work on, politics and sexuality and so on, my argument is essentially that there are images that *contain* and images that *don’t contain*. A vocabulary constructed with images that have to do with history and move back and forth in time, images that continue to speak over a long period, images that actually have the capability of communicating to diverse audiences. And even though you may be rooted in a specific cultural context, it’s possible to be extremely complex. The natural instinct is to simplify in order to make sense worldwide, but I have found that you don’t have to simplify to be able to relate to a Norwegian audience or a Cambodian audience or a South American audience.

GK But all the subjects that you are preoccupied with are, of course, universal.

AK In a sense, yes. Sometimes you feel that everything is universal and it just depends how you look at it. But different individuals and communities use different methodologies for archiving, and recall differently. Certain narratives within a community may find a route of living and hiding in a particular visual vocabulary, while another community will have another vocabulary. A lot of my work is the search for these hidden sets of images. When you put them together, you create languages; you create a space, a passage, an experience that different types of people can relate to on many levels. Apart from the spoken language—which does matter—most of what I make I could show in a rural Indian space as well as in England or the United States, and these very different communities could all relate to it.

HUO Despite their very different contexts.

AK Yes. I have a range of objectives in the films. With the photograph of the girl who was killed, my objective was to bring this image back, but you can't find it. The image exists only within those who were close to the girl or those who were in the resistance, and only in reproduction from memory. It is a deteriorating, kind of semi-lost image. It's interesting: when you see it, it is very similar to the Soweto image, the child who was shot being carried during the anti-apartheid riots in South Africa in 1976. So there are several different kinds of very small moments that I pick up from the Burmese resistance, but across the world in contexts that seem to be European, American, Indian, Thai, and they all draw you in.

GK The content is international, and Burma is a pretext for you.

AK Exactly. It is about authority, one's own relationship with authority.

HUO The way that you juxtapose the narratives when you bring the films together in the installation is almost like curating, but your process is much more complex than what the term implies; it's an in-between thing, between your personal lan-

guage and a collective language. When did you first pick up a camera? Did you come out of a cinema context?

AK No, it's not as if I dreamed of being a filmmaker. I studied history in Delhi, and after that I studied film, just because I had to do something, not out of some burning desire. I just made whatever I felt like, all kinds of films. The first time that I actually shot something of worth was around 1986.

HUO What was your first film?

AK There was a construction site for a big, fancy building here, and a worker had fallen and died. The other workers on the site had taken the body of this man to the office of the management company and placed it in the foyer of the fancy office and refused to leave until his family was compensated. There was an old woman who really took charge of this whole process immediately after the man died. My first film was essentially about her.

JULIA PEYTON JONES Your work really has its roots in this experience. It seems to have politicized your practice. What led you to choose Burma as a subject?

AK There are several reasons. I have been filming across India and showing all over the world for many years now, and for some time I have been questioning the meaning of nationality and the construct of this nation, India. It's a bit stupid to only operate within the boundaries of British India, this political framework that was made in 1947. A lot of my work is about ripping this apart; it's about destroying this nation, really. And at the same time confronting the 'nation' of the inner self as well.

GK Then it's about fusion, too.

AK Fusion *and* destruction—sometimes they do seem inadequate as words, but it's about reconfiguration, about gaining a new understanding about what this nation is all about. The idea is that when you experience the films, you are left with a new relationship with your supposed nation. I went to Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Tibet and Burma to look at the region as

- a whole, because the whole configuration of nations is fraudulent. In many places it exists in name only; in reality it doesn't exist. And within these countries, even within the *legitimate* boundaries, the notion of the nation has been very seriously questioned and continues to be questioned, and that needs to be understood. So to answer your question: "Why Burma?" With Burma I am relating not only to the official political boundaries of this country but also to the region, and I will work outside it and around it and so on.
- GK So your project stops at the frontier of the region. Does it go beyond that? Where are the limits?
- AK There have been limits worked out as to what is South Asia or what is the subcontinent, but if you really had to pin it down you could go right across from Afghanistan to Burma. This is one large region that has many cultural affinities. You can talk about the culture of the entire region as one, with many ethnic and political constructs within it that are forced and unreal.
- GK You are interested in destroying the notion of national identity, but isn't it somewhat imperialist to frame a cultural group regionally, to essentially extend the nation to the region?
- AK My work is subversive, not imperialist at all. It is necessary to remember, question and reconfigure continuously.
- HUO Your destruction of that national idea is intriguing. Right now exhibitions of Indian art are popping up all over the world. I am curious how you feel about all these shows. Is the construct of the "nation" the wrong category? Perhaps in your view, exhibitions should start to look at regions instead, or at links between countries in a region: a link from India to Pakistan, or to Afghanistan, or to Burma. Is it now more about what happens between cities? Does the city replace the nation? But then we are back to the 1990s, when the city became the dominant category. That cannot be the answer either.
- AK Well, what I am talking about is not just a question of conceiving of an exhibition, but a question of conceiving new relationships of many kinds with the region. But how do I feel about an Indian show opening every six months? It makes me squirm. That's my gut reaction.
- GK Is that because the nation is treated as a cultural region?
- AK It's not that. I am uncomfortable with this whole process of discovery, this sudden interest, this perception of opening up. All of this growth and new cultural or artistic space is really a spin-off of the economic situation, and the economic consequences have to be looked at. The perception about this region has changed because the markets have opened up, because resources have become available to the international market, to industry. There is more international interest in Indian bauxite than in Indian art. We need to see what is really happening and why.
- HUO It's interesting—right now there is a very heated art market in India, yet your practice comes from somewhere totally different: it comes from political activity, from documentary filmmaking, and from the linking of the two. As you said, throughout the 1990s you showed all over, in many different cities, in festivals and movie houses—
- AK —and out in villages, in towns, generally in society.
- HUO So throughout the 1990s you worked within society at large. And now in 2008, you are exhibiting in very big international galleries; your work is part of the art market. Asger Jorn was always saying that he sold a lot of paintings in the art market in the 1950s, and with the money he financed the Situationist movement. In your case, how do you continue to be subversive once you are in the system?
- AK There are many systems; no one is really out of any. Pretty early on it became clear to me that it is not necessary for me to only exist within the art world. The art world is not my only world. It offers me a few things, such as a particular audience and a certain kind of support that comes without strings, but there are many other worlds that offer many different audiences and many different kinds of interactions with an audience, and I exist in those worlds as well. So if the art world/market disappeared tomorrow morning, I would not

lose my coordinates; I would keep doing what I am doing. Though there *is* something exceptional that I get from the art context: more space. Not physical space, but space to conceive. There are many sectors that you can work with: radio, television, art, whatever. Each sector has a set of expectations, perceptions of what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, and many of those can be quite tiresome, even painful. Even the art sector. I have attended lectures by very prominent curators who have argued for a film in a biennial or a museum to be not more than four minutes.

HUO That's the opposite of what we're doing right now at the Serpentine.

JPI We have two feature films of an hour-and-a-half.

AK But in the art sector overall, far more than anywhere else, there are a lot of individuals, spaces, foundations, curators, who understand risk and who understand failure, and for me that is very valuable. As far as your second question is concerned, for me it was essential not to think so much of the economics of art as much as the issue of protecting what one is thinking, what one is trying to make, where one is existing, who one is making art for. Is my language changing? Is my objective changing without my realizing it? It's really about protecting your inner self and your subject matter. There are certain unspoken codes in the art world that define what works—what is precise, what is effervescent, what is beautiful, what is easy to sell and so on—and the issue really is how to protect myself from these external codes. If I am able to do that, I will continue to be political, I will continue to be subversive. To that end, I have my own set of codes that I try to follow. For example, as soon as I think, "This is perfect for a museum context," I know immediately that I need to question it.

HUO How do you decide on the subject of a film? Let's use your Documenta XII installation, *The Lightning Testimonies* [2007], as an example.

AK There are many reasons why I started working on the subject of sexual violence in a political context. It's something that

repeats itself. It has been happening for hundreds of years. It is a subject that we don't like to visit. And again, it's a subject where we don't know how to tell the story. There were several incidents that took place in India, including incidents of sexual violence by the Indian army in regions that do not consider themselves part of India, so there's also a nationality context here. In the last several years there have been incidents that were remarkably brutal, and there have been illustrations of that brutality in the media. What I found difficult to accept was that these illustrations that were demonstrating brutality, essentially, were celebrating brutality publicly, socially. It is possible to understand brutality, but I found it very difficult to understand how to celebrate brutality, and I felt that I needed to get into this. The film also exists in Hindi, so I can show it in the subcontinent as well. It must be shown here, it must be understood, it must be criticized, and you must hear that criticism. Again, if you are working in an international art market, it is essential to preserve the inherent reason why you work, and the context of it and its relationship to where you work.

JPI When the work is shown outside the subcontinent, for example in Europe, it will be unusual for people to understand the specific relationship to India. What about the inevitably different reading?

AK I could take you through the last ten years of my work and stop at different points inside a film and say, these four images mean this to you, and they mean this to another community, and they emerge from a tradition that is very old, a tradition that is linked up to various texts or historical events. On the face of it they don't seem to be related that way. So the same film can be shown to the world and mean one thing, and be shown to a particular community and mean something completely different. There is an "inevitably different reading" everywhere—within India, within the subcontinent as well. People find ways to understand and people understand in many ways.

HUO Who are some of your inspirations, not only from cinema?

AK That's a difficult question. I am continuously inspired. I can hear somebody talking on the street and feel like making a

film. I can go see a Bollywood film and come back ready to start working on something totally different. Basically, I hang out, I meet people, I go all over the place. It's this region, this world around me that inspires me. It's very easy for me. It would be inaccurate if I were to say Andrei Tarkovsky—and therefore conclude—even though he is an inspiration too. But really every third film that I see inspires me, of course in different ways.

GK What if we put it a different way and ask how would you contextualize yourself in terms of other artists making cinema?

AK So far I have not found any reason to do so.

JPI It seems to me that you are as free—as much as one can ever be free, from the disciplines that you work in, your choice of subject matter, and because of your lack of interest, it appears, in the market.

AK But I *am* interested in the market; I am just not interested in succumbing to it. I am not in any way saying that I do not like the color of money. I like money. One of the reasons I am showing in a gallery is because it gives me the opportunity to earn money. There are opportunities that I find within the art world that actually allow me to earn money with no strings attached. The curators at Documenta XI, for example, invited me to make a film of my choice and left it at that. I could have made a seven-minute film, which would have been perfect. I could have made it without any language, which would have been even better and easy to sell. But I ended up making *A Night of Prophecy* [2002], a seventy-seven minute film in twelve languages and nobody knows what the hell it is all about! And when I was finished, I said, "Do you want to see it?" They said, "No. We'll see it with the audience." They saw the film for the first time at the premiere along with everybody else. So in this case—as you can see—I really was completely free.

HUO Tell us about *A Night of Prophecy*.

AK It's a film that had a hypothesis: Is it possible for me to understand the passage of time through poetry? And if it were possible, even for one instant, then will I be able to see the future?

Because if you are able to understand time, you should be able to see the future.

HUO Beautiful.

AK So would poetry allow me to do that? Using this hypothesis I identified what you may say are four or five basic fault lines in the subcontinent, or in this India, the official India. One fault line was caste, one was labor, partly then religion, and nationality. I traveled on these fault lines meeting people and recording poetry from people who had written it themselves, not from anybody else. A lot of old poetry, some unpublished, a lot even unwritten, only memorized. Some of it is from regions that are fighting to be independent of colonial India. I traveled for about a year and a half, hanging out, basically, listening to poetry and recording and filming and then putting it together. So for seventy-seven minutes you have this journey, only song and poetry, no prose. That's what it is. *A Night of Prophecy* is a film that lives beyond me now. It works for a set of reasons. It continues to be shown, and because of that film, I can go anywhere. Again, I do not want to give the impression that I am trying to be holy in relation to the art market.

GK The gallery system today and the capitalist system are so flexible, and the bourgeoisie in general so flexible, everything becomes a market product in the end. Even the holy!

HUO That's why I brought up Asger Jorn.

AK It would be even better not to say what you are going to do with the money. You may finance the Situationists, but you don't tell anyone. The moment you tell, you get sold as the guy who does it. Of course, that would be useful too, because you'd maybe get even more money to do what you are doing. But the real issue is for your work to make sense. It's about the reason why you make it. When I made *The Face*, which is part of "The Torn First Pages," I had two reasons: one was that the Indian government was supplying arms to the dictatorship and had invited the Burmese military dictator. This had to be reacted to—protested against—and if not collectively then at least in a small way, but something that registers a protest against this relationship. The second reason

was something that I was wishing for: I wanted to make the Burmese smile a little bit. The Burmese situation is so tragic; there are decades of horror stories and military atrocities and abuse. Everything that I was working on vis-à-vis Burma was so somber and unhappy and filled with grief. But when you meet the Burmese themselves, one of the things that really strikes you over and over is their sense of humor, black or otherwise. So I wanted to make something that brought a bit of a smile to them as well. The film has started to travel a lot among the Burmese, from person to person and organization to organization. It has a question that accompanies it. We know what Idi Amin looks like, we know what Pinochet looks like, we even know what Aung San Suu Kyi looks like, the pro-democracy activist and politician in Burma who has been under house arrest for years. But do you know what this guy Than Shwe looks like? This guy who has imprisoned her? He is very particular about who films him and where. It's not easy to film him.

HUO You're talking about the dictator.

AK Yes. General Than Shwe, the Supreme Head of the Burmese Military Dictatorship. So I thought of just doing something where you could see his face, but here you see his face in a context that you will not forget. He was visiting India, in 2004. Every head of state who comes to India has to go to the cremation memorial site of [Mahatma] Gandhi in New Delhi at 9:30 in the morning to pay respects. It's a ritual. So he came and put a wreath on the memorial and threw a handful of petals onto it, and I was able to film him secretly. By chance a news photographer there misses the vital shot of him throwing petals on Gandhi. He requests from the general a repeat pose of throwing the petals . . .

GK Wow!

AK There is always somebody watching.

HUO Has the government in Burma seen it, do you think?

AK Yes. I know that they saw it. There is a very good political magazine called *Himal Southasian* that is published in Kath-

mandu, Nepal. They saw the film and made it a cover story, and that blew any chance of doing this quietly.

HUO How did they react?

AK How do I know? Enough to know that I cannot go there. An important Burmese literary figure once gave an interview on the telephone to a German radio station, and the military arrived in the middle of the night. He was a national figure, but they took him out, his family, everything in his house, every single book was thrown into a truck and driven off. He was put in prison, and it was only because he was such a well-known person that after several years, and several appeals, they released him. He managed to get out of the country and never returned. Four or five years ago I read a beautiful haiku written by another poet, Tin Moe, and I started trying to find him. I finally found him in New York, and I recorded him reciting the haiku again. He had written it in the 1950s. He was imprisoned for his writings for five years. When he went to prison, in the 1990s, he found his own haiku written on the wall in the prison. There are many stories of that kind in this region