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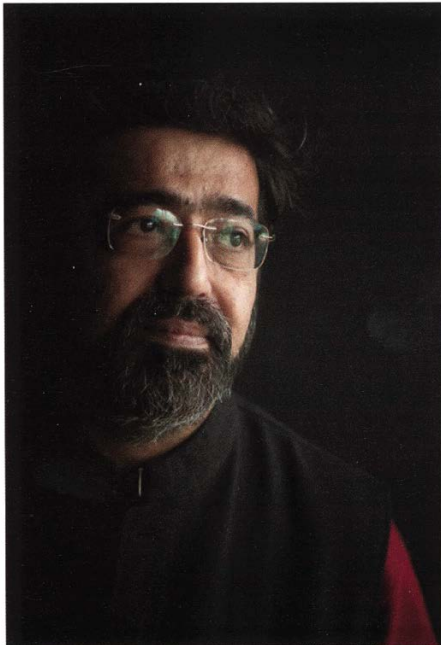
Of Doubt and Disturbances

The potent fragility of Amar Kanwar's archives

BY EMILIA TERRACCIANO

Amar Kanwar, 2013.

●PROSE: Installation view of two stills from *The Scene of Crime*, 2011. HD video, 42 min.



AN ARTIST AND independent filmmaker best known for his poignant documentaries, which probe the political, social, and ecological dimensions of the Indian subcontinent, Amar Kanwar still lives in New Delhi, where he was born in 1964. His most recent and ongoing project, *The Sovereign Forest*—part multimedia installation, part exhibition—explores the devastating impact of corporate mining on the ecosystem of Orissa, a region in eastern India. *The Sovereign Forest* functions as an archive of a world and a way of life that threaten to disappear irrevocably. This beautiful and ominous inventory is on view at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in West Bretton, U.K., until February 2014. The project is intended to resonate with the coal-mining history of the region: Defunct mining towns surround the estate, which is situated on a disused coalfield.

EMILIA TERRACCIANO: We witness contemporary practitioners engaging more and more with the idea of the postcolonial archive to question the institutional and political dimensions of their own work, particularly as the latter takes shape, along with speculation in the art market and the changing role of memorialization in the public sphere. How do you see yourself as engaging with the legacy of the archive?

AMAR KANWAR: I don't see myself engaged with a contemporary art legacy of archiving within a "postcolonial" preoccupation. The reference is not needed. If we want to use the term and the framework it implies, then it is possible—perhaps necessary—for me to say that as a filmmaker, I have been archiving since the day I started. I would go out with an objective, I would return with hundreds of images. And, intrinsically, a series of hierarchies, too. Every film I make is an archive. ●ne that you see and one that you don't that remains with me. At least for a while.

ET: Has your approach to archiving changed over the years?

AK: ●ver time I learned that I had also brought back hundreds of sounds as well. Even later they became collections of light, colors, and movement. Eventually and obviously, they were containers containing spectrums of representations of random multiple times. And so on. And therefore the question of relationships. Actually, the temporary relationship between each of your questions is the answer to all your questions. My approach has shifted from a definitive "collection" to a temporary matrix of forms, senses, and time.

ET: So in a sense, you challenge the idea of the archive as authoritative institution and lean more toward vernacular memory?

AK: Regardless of which tradition you actually refer to, most archives have or eventually develop an intrinsic relationship with power. The kings, the patriarchs, the state—all eventually foreground, subsume, subjugate, and reassert authority. The real question perhaps is the continuous destruction of the archive. And to learn from the archives that exist, where many worlds, planes of existence, are experienced so as to



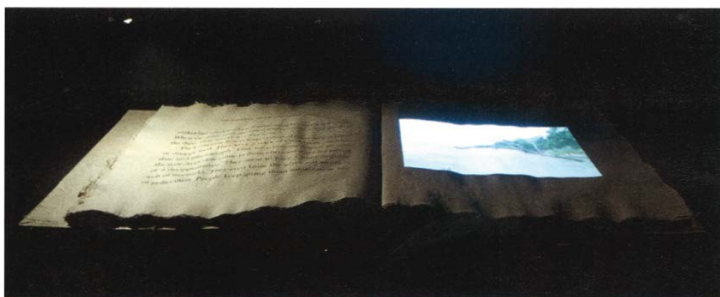
dramatically alter one's perceptions of reality and space.

ET: The idea of alteration seems crucial in your practice. Do you see yourself as applying pressure on the idea of documentary, perhaps to educate viewers?

AK: The document of the documentary has for long already been thrown up into the air. Is an illusion more real than a fact? Which vocabulary is more appropriate for a dream? How can a pamphlet be a poem, how can a poem be the story of a murder, how can a murder become a ballad, how can a ballad become an argument, how can an argument become a vulnerability, the expression of which itself negates the argument but eventually shifts all positions? I am more concerned with doubt and disturbances.

ET: Like Ko Than Htay, the Burmese bookseller protagonist of your video installation *The Torn First Pages*, 2004–08. Htay tore out the first pages of all books and journals he sold that contained ideological slogans of the Burmese military dictatorship. Does your experience of creating films allow you to tear out pages, to defy authority and share this experience?

AK: Htay's defiance was different. He did tear out these first pages. Before he sold the books to customers and retailers, he tore out the first page of every single book as his own act of resistance against the dictatorship, so that people who bought books from his shop did not have to see the slogans of the military regime when they read the books. What Htay did was very simple, but



Installation view of *The Counting Sisters and Other Stories*, 2011, part 2 of *The Sovereign Forest*. Hand-sewn book of handmade banana-fiber paper; screen print; HD video projection, 40 min.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: Two stills from *The Smile*, 2007, a single-channel video and a component of the 19-channel installation *The Torn First Pages*, 2004–08, pictured at bottom.

it was an act of great courage. It was unique, personal, but totally anonymous. The consequences could be grave: He and his family faced direct and immediate danger from a vicious army. Eventually, he was arrested in December 1994 for tearing and possessing the torn first pages. He was sentenced to three years' imprisonment and torture in the infamous Mandalay prison. I feel every page torn by Htay links him forever with the author of every book sold, with the spirit of every artist striving to work in freedom without restrictions or censorship. So in that sense, there is a responsibility—to respond.

If you look at the Burmese democratic movement, the resistance spanning several decades, you will see an enormous collection of organized and random evidence, put together formally as well as personally by friends, families, and activists. And in many forms: images, documents, objects, words, and just about anything possible. Not only as an act of remembrance but also as a conscious collection and preservation of evidence of abuse and violence. Collected in the context of what seemed to be an unshakable, all-powerful, brutal totalitarian regime destined to stay forever. And yet why do you collect evidence? Every trace collected was an act of hope. This was an archive of hope.

For me this archive of hope, this preservation of each trace, this tearing out of the pages, is an inspiration and a way forward. *The Torn First Pages*—made out of 19 projections on floating sheets of paper—allowed me to present this evidence in the form that it actually exists and, more so, to push it further, into an archiving of time. The films in Part 1 of the installation are distinct, autonomous, and interconnected but clearly present five

different times with their own obvious trajectories and patterns of movement. Part 2 opens up a single zone within which multiple times flow, in which the said and the unsaid are projected together and within which time also shoots off unexpectedly on a tangent. Part 3 presents the process of archiving and displaying the past. All three parts together create an experience of archiving the multiplicity of time and of a temporary passing through it. This temporary passing, for me, is my defiance. My releasing into the air, of an archive of disturbances.

ET: Does disturbance trickle through your recent project, *The Sovereign Forest*? What led you to make this work?

AK: Severe violence in multiple visible and invisible forms. A deep sense of loss, an exhaustion with a world of super-articulations and a need to understand and to live. And a set of questions: How to understand the conflict around us? How to understand crime? Who defines evidence? Is legally valid evidence adequate to understand the meaning and extent of a crime? Can poetry be presented as evidence in a criminal or political trial? What is the validity of such evidence? What is the vocabulary of a language that can talk about a series of simultaneous disappearances occurring across multiple dimensions of our lives? How to see, know, understand, and remember these disappearances? How to look again?

ET: Can you say a little more about the project?

AK: *The Sovereign Forest* attempts to reopen discussion and initiate a creative response to our understanding of crime, politics, human rights, and ecology. The validity of poetry as evidence in a trial; the discourse on seeing, on understanding, on compassion, on issues of justice; sovereignty and the determination of the self—all come together in a constellation of moving and still images, texts, books, pamphlets, albums, music, objects, seeds, events, and processes. *The Sovereign Forest* has overlapping identities. It continuously reincarnates as an art installation, an exhibition, a library, a memorial, a public trial, an open call for the collection of more "evidence," an archive, and also a proposition for a space that engages with political issues as well as with art. The central film, *The Scene of Crime*, offers an experience of landscape just prior to erasure. Almost every image in this film lies within specific territories that are proposed industrial sites and are in the process of being acquired by the government and corporations in Orissa, India. Every location, every blade of grass, every water source, every tree that is seen in the film is now meant not to exist anymore. *The Scene of Crime* is an experience of "looking" at the terrain of this conflict and the personal lives that exist within this natural landscape. The constellation accompanying the film is the ever-changing, continuously growing inadequate archive of so-called invalid evidence.

ET: In the West, the *historia* derives from the root *-id*, which means to see. *Histor* is in origin the eyewitness, the one who has seen. Yet memory is inconstant, not a fixed manifestation of the past. Every time memory is articulated, it changes. Can we change memories and the feelings we associate with them?

AK: I do not know, but I do feel that what we have to relate to and embrace is the inadequacy of the archive. The presence activates the absence. The collection activates the unknown. It is not the archive that we cling to but the uncertainty in the core of the archive. What is true is false and what is false is true so easily in this territory; testimonies and memories are fluid, constantly changing, and so it is this temporary fragility that is mobile, potent, and revealing.

ET: You've observed that "the act of remembering is an act of moving forward in time." But can we witness and remember anew?

AK: If the attempt to remember is presented along with what is remembered, if what seems definitive is presented along with what is uncertain, if the part and the whole are both simultaneously visible—then perhaps it may, possibly. I think, create a sense of comprehension that seems new. **MP**



“Most archives have or eventually develop an intrinsic relationship with power.”

