

IMAGES OF

disturbance

FUSE 18 *Images of Disturbance: Richard Fung in Conversation with Amar Kanwar*



RICHARD FUNG in conversation with AMAR KANWAR

Amar Kanwar's non-fiction films, videos and media installations engage with his native India and adjoining territories of the subcontinent. At the core of his ruminations on nationalisms, environmental devastation, caste and class, corporate globalization, masculinity, gendered violence and the abuse of indigenous peoples are an incisive and nuanced analysis of power and resistance, an insistent curiosity and a poetic sensibility. He moves nimbly between the general and specific, holding each in productive tension, so that we apprehend forest and tree all at once.

Kanwar's works express a deep understanding of cinema, including its affective power, and his range of artistic strategies is as wide as the span of topics. Avoiding interviews and recorded conversations, Kanwar's films are organized around issues and ideas rather than characters or events. His aesthetic precision can be breathtaking.

Amar Kanwar. <left> Henningsvaer (filmstill), 2006. <right> The Lightning Testimonies (film still), 2007. Photo: the artist. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Marian Goodman, Paris.

I first discovered Amar Kanwar's work in 2002 at Documenta 11 in Kassel, Germany. At Documenta 12, in 2007, his 8-channel video, *The Lightning Testimonies*, was the most memorable artwork I saw. The installation analyzes sexual violence against women as an intrinsic component of border conflicts across the Indian subcontinent, starting with the sexual assault of 75,000 women during the 1947 partition into India and Pakistan. As the 32-minute loop draws to a close seven of the screens fall dark, focusing attention on the performance of a play based on Mahasweta Devi's story *Draupadi*. Famously translated and theorized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, its captured heroine is a tortured adivasi (tribal) revolutionary who uses her naked body to shame her police captors. *The Lightning Testimonies* then climaxes with footage of a 2004 demonstration in which 12 naked mothers stormed the gates of a military barracks in the northeast state of Manipur to protest the custodial rape and murder of a young woman by Indian security forces.

Amar Kanwar is based in New Delhi and when I spent the winter of 2009 in that city as a visiting professor at the institution in which he completed his MA in Mass Communication, meeting him was a priority. We did meet in India, but this email correspondence was conducted after my return to Canada. For those unfamiliar with the work of Amar Kanwar I include short descriptions of five of his many productions.

THE INTERVIEW

Richard Fung: A striking feature of your work on India is how you represent the nation. As in many postcolonial countries, the geographical limits of India are arbitrary and contested. Its current borders are the result of British colonial expansion and of partition from Pakistan (now Pakistan and Bangladesh), and several armed separatist groups are currently active, most notably in Kashmir and the North East states. In films such as *The Many Faces of Madness*, *A Night of Prophecy* and *The Lightning Testimonies* you focus on particular localities, often at different ends of the country, but you combine this footage so as to suggest a profound interconnection. It is as if you are simultaneously positing and deconstructing the nation.

Amar Kanwar: Most of us exist within constructs. We grow up in families or schools that construct ways of being and living, thinking, dreaming. Even our aspirations and demons are handed out to us, often in layers over time. You could spend a lifetime within a construct without even knowing it. To live it, it is essential at the least to identify. A continuous process of identification can itself become the process of deconstruction, leading possibly to a momentary space that allows us to create again.

Most of my work emerges from a disturbance, a sense of unease. And the process of its exploration and resolution becomes the film.



A SEASON OUTSIDE, 1997, 30 minutes

A SEASON OUTSIDE

A Season Outside takes as its starting point the synchronized performance of ritualized hostility that marks the daily closing of the border at Wagah, a Punjabi village partitioned between India and Pakistan in 1947, and the only road crossing between the two countries. Sponsored by the Dalai Lama's Foundation for Universal Responsibility, this personal essay contemplates the question of violence in politics, culture and nature: "... I am trying to understand the dynamics of division and in turn find a method for dealing with conflict," the artist declares in the narration.

Kanwar does not underestimate the challenges to sustaining non-violence: he recalls the Partition stories of his terrified female relatives in the Punjab nailing the windows shut against possible invaders; he delivers images of Chinese military brutality against unarmed Tibetans; over a sequence

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For instance, in 1991 I found myself, a young filmmaker, surrounded by thousands of people and shooting for the first time away from the comfort of my own town. It was the funeral of Shankar Guha Niyogi, the leader of probably the largest democratic mass movement of workers, peasants and adivasis (tribal people) in post-independence India. He was assassinated in 1991 in Chattisgarh, where he lived and worked. Those few days and the many images that I returned with created a disturbance. The answer to the question of why was he killed can lead to a series of questions that traverse issues of community rights and common properties to the complex wounds that now construct a web of nationalities.

Rivers, mountains ranges and oil fields are being sold off to corporations by central and state governments in India. Why do we remove a colonial empire to keep on replacing it with different versions of the same thing? Why are several states in India under a different law that grants impunity to the Indian army? Why are we continuous victims of cycles of violence? The violent movement for an independent Sikh nation led to massive state violence and disappearances, which then led to the assassination of an Indian prime minister, which then led to the retaliatory massacre of a few thousand Sikhs in just three days in the capital city of New Delhi in 1984. Which construct are we then imprisoned within? Why did Hindus and Muslims begin a mutual massacre in 1946-47, and what is the power

of this bloodletting that can even now define national politics and personal behaviours and psychologies?

No doubt this nation is unacceptable as it is now and so it is true, as you say, that the films are simultaneously positing and deconstructing the nation, but they are also confronting and conversing with the nation of the inner self — which for me is equally important. That's the interconnection that I explore.

RF: Many of your works feature voice-over narration in a distinctive style that is at once poetic and polemical. The positionality of the narrator is neither “voice of God,” nor is it truly autobiographical. The narrator implicates the viewer as “you” or “we” when describing the complicity of the state with national and transnational corporate interests. Can you talk about narration and subject address in your work?

AK: At times, a set of ethical dilemmas about the telling and making of a story coalesce and confront you. To proceed, a temporary resolution of these ethical issues is needed and this can often result in the creation of a new form, the re-articulation of an older form, or a shift in practice. It may seem to be the same but it isn't. And because it has arisen from a certain discomfort it will inherently address that discomfort. For instance, the voice of god can be continuously subverted by the voice of a doubting god. The Sufi and Bhakti

of a puppy mercilessly harassed by crows, he ponders when it might be justified to “arm your truth.” Nor does Kanwar romanticize the proponents of philosophies of non-violence. He cites Gandhi's admiration for Leo Tolstoy, whose writings helped shape Gandhi's philosophy of Satyagraha. Kanwar later learns of the years of abuse Tolstoy meted out to his wife Sophia. Is violence in the home any less egregious than violence in the street?

The film ends back at the border at Wagah. But this time it looks beyond the hyper-masculine posturing of the soldiers and focuses instead on the eyes of the Pakistanis as they peer through the iron gates towards the other side. Kanwar finds hope in a bespectacled boy as he stares across the divide, not hostile or suspicious, but pensive and curious. Perhaps this child will be able to free himself from the inherited cycle of violence based on “someone else's memories.”

THE MANY FACES OF MADNESS, 2000, 19 minutes

THE MANY FACES OF MADNESS

The Many Faces of Madness opens with a three-minute helicopter shot over the Rajasthan desert as Kanwar intones off-screen, “Four hundred years ago our ancestors — ‘our’ meaning yours and mine — realized that you cannot drink gold. So they measured every single gradient along the slopes of the plateau and built the most unique one-walled canal that you'll ever see. With just two nights of good rain the water slides along the rocks and comes down along the wall, travelling several miles to fill several lakes and tanks, and so harnessing water for many months.” Today, we are told, the land has been divided and sold off. As the camera glides above, the mighty landscape becomes increasingly pock marked with quarries until all signs of the walled canal disappear. As private interests ascend, people and land are left thirsty.

This is only the beginning of a catalogue of environmental and attendant human rights abuses documented across India. In the Himalayas, 70 percent of medicinal plants are uprooted prematurely, and 100 have been patented abroad. On the coast, mangrove forests are bulldozed and fisherfolk displaced to comply with laws that restrict commercial development to land that is unforested and unpopulated. On the plains, companies invent increasingly clever methods to illegally dispose of toxic chemicals, from sending lorries out in the dead of night in search of secluded ditches in which to dump their cargo, to pumping waste directly into the ground water, making its source untraceable. Most shocking is that governmental and non-governmental bodies at state, national and international levels have long documented these practices, but have taken little action. Kanwar's conclusion: “we are a nation at war with our own

traditions are another interesting example of how the relationship to god itself is subverted. Over the last few decades the shift away from the “voice of god” to the autobiographical has been quite interesting. At times, however, it seemed that the negative reaction to the authoritarian voice got converted to become a negative reaction to “a passionate point of view,” which further became a negative response to any “point of view,” which further became a negative response to “self belief,” which in a way fits quite well with a genuine state of helplessness. In such a situation, and simply speaking, the most convenient answer becomes to either be “autobiographical” no matter how self-obsessed, uninteresting or unethical it is, to become ironically absurd in the smartest way possible or to completely erase your own self and manipulate a sense of “openness” by pretending to bring the viewer and the subject close to each other. Of course we also have the formula of the “human interest story” with a slight dash of political correctness. All these answers seemed to me inadequate. In the complex and slip-sliding terrain of the politics of power it would be naïve and self-righteous to play god, to be autobiographical or to intelligently pose looking the other way.

It seems that in life there are always continuous dialogues taking place between the inner self and the outer self. There is also a dialogue with trees, stones and events, and with people near or far, alive or dead. Said and unsaid, clear and whispered. Also, in life

there is a continuous dialogue between the past, the present and the future. Every thought, step or decision is entangled in an oscillating time. You and I exist in this fluidity, and it seems that in a heightened awareness of this fluidity all positions begin to get temporarily and gently dislodged, reversed, and re-understood. And so we may all understand a bit more. It is this narrative experience that I am looking for. It is here that one can seamlessly move between something deeply personal and something that is hugely political and back, and so on.

RF: Do you always shoot with a project in mind, or are you continuously collecting images? I’m spurred to ask this question by the remarkable scene of the puppy being harassed by house crows in *A Season Outside*.

AK: I almost always shoot with an idea in mind and do not randomly collect images. The puppy and the crows happened 10 feet from the border fence between India and Pakistan in the open fields. I think because as a crew we were obsessed with trying to understand violence and resistance we noticed the interaction between the puppy and the crows. Probably on another day we would not have even noticed it. In fact, we were talking that morning about how to prepare to film what we do not expect.



A NIGHT OF PROPHECY, 2002, 77 minutes

land and water, with our own people, and we do not even know it.” Is the inability or unwillingness to acknowledge these outrages a kind of collective psychosis, he asks: “Has the logic of commerce, the opportunity for greed become so powerful that it seems to push us all to a state of delusion, so that we cannot see what is before our own eyes?”

A NIGHT OF PROPHECY

Words and music from the states of Kashmir, Andhra Pradesh, Nagaland and Maharashtra — the north, south, east and west of India — interweave like the warp and weft threads on a tapestry in this exploration of poetry and song as political discourse, a speculation on their power to communicate and address grievances and turmoil. The film opens on Andhra poet G. Venkanna as he rhythmically taps a small stone against the massive granite outcrop on which he is reclined, and sings of a strange night in which an ascetic reveals the meaning of life. Over his song, the visu-

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RF: Your films have been sponsored by the National Tree Growers' Cooperative Federation in Gujarat, among other NGOs, but even in these works the voice of the artist is atypically strong.

AK: I suppose if you keep on working in the way you think right, and if you are open to responses along the way without losing your own self, and if you do this for a while then people begin to relate to your vocabulary and support it. If you persist with showing your work to diverse audiences then that experience also generates a process that helps in many ways. Further, the two organizations you refer to have intelligent and enlightened leaderships. I think over time I have understood that even institutions have the capability to imagine and to take risk.

RF: What role did the Mass Communication Research Centre play in the development of your practice?

AK: I am afraid I can't say much about influence because nothing soul-stirring happened there except perhaps to say that it was a space that encouraged a critical and social engagement, and that was very important. I do recall very fondly the passion of Jim Beveridge in his last year there. Seeing an old man speak of images with such love is unforgettable. Seeing flashes of irreverence in another old man, A.J. Kidwai, was also inspiring. I was fortunate to witness and experience the spirit of these two veterans.

RF: Documenta 11 curator Sarat Maharaj recently told me that your interest in installation came about partly through your exposure to work you saw there. What attracted you in the form?

AK: It's not Documenta 11 and the installation as much as the experience then and after of interacting with its energy. An energy that inspires to explore human relationships and politics with as much freedom that one can imagine. The real meaning of Documenta 11 for me is a long discussion. The installation is always attractive because it allows another more tangible space for a multiplicity of experiences. In that way sometimes it seems closer to life. It is not more or less, or better or worse. It's another vocabulary. In essence we are still in the realm of images, sound, poetry and time and life of course.

RF: Your most recent work focuses on repression in Burma. What generated that shift and has it engendered different ways of working?

AK: I had friends who were lawyers and working with Burmese refugees/activists in exile in India. Over time I began to understand the meaning of the Burmese resistance and also made a few Burmese friends. At first I was quite shocked by my own ignorance about the democracy movement in Burma. Five decades of struggle, students sacrificing their lives over and over again. It was hard to understand this courage. I felt I needed to respond in any small way possible.

als inexplicably cut away to a city street at night, a pot, and a hanging cradle. A paddle dips into soft green ripples. A curtain billows to reveal the bare back of a longhaired man seated in a wooden doorway. As the film progresses, these tantalizing but enigmatic fragments find their context in the different geographical strands. With no narration or textual explication, intercutting among different locations and poets makes for surprisingly riveting cinema. This deceptively simple structural device brings forward — and commingles — the artists' passionate interventions on exploitation, caste, religious communalism and conflicts over national identity.

MA WIN MAW OO

One in a series of short videos against the military dictatorship in Burma, this tape memorializes Win Maw Oo, killed at the age of 13 while demonstrating against the regime in 1988. Known as the 8888 Uprising (began August 8, 1988), the protests

MA WIN MAW OO, 2005, 4 minutes



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This resistance needed to be understood and respected. Also, I wanted to work outside the framework of the political boundaries of the Indian nation but still within the subcontinent. We need to respond and relate to the subcontinent as a region. This region will not look the same after 20 years. We have a commonality of interest, of cultures, that is stronger than lines on a map.

Further, I didn't want to construct a "human interest" story about this resistance and run around looking for funding, so I began to work on my own. To make a series of films, thoughts, image moments. Instead of rushing into Burma to understand it, I began to circle it, to move away in order to end up being close to it. I had no structure, no narrative, no client, no bleeding heart, no missionary misconceptions. This helped me make films in an open and free way and to explore many ways of understanding the Burmese resistance. Eventually, it resulted in *The Torn First Pages* — 19 projections as an installation and five single-channel films. This project enabled me to tangibly present an experience on film where we can witness the passage of multiple times in a single narrative so as to open up different forms of comprehension.

RF: These videos are more abstract than your works on India. Does this represent a more general shift away from documentary traditions towards a more experimental non-fiction approach?

AK: More abstract to see or to tell? Abstraction is multi-layered and can be expressed and experienced in many ways. There are all kinds of abstractions in earlier work, but maybe to answer your question specifically — I could say, in a way yes, but it's just what happened at the time, what seemed appropriate and emerged. I always resist the interpretation and the need for an interpretation that wishes to "conclude" specific directions or "shifts" or "leaving behind" or questions of tradition, etc. I don't really feel like I have left something to go towards something else. When you ride a bicycle sometimes you let go of the handlebars and ride, and sometimes you don't. Sometimes you even walk with the bike. I feel and do many things all the time.

RICHARD FUNG is a video artist and writer, and an Associate Professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design. Over the winter of 2009 he was Visiting Professor at the James Beveridge Media Resource Centre, Mass Communication Research Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia in New Delhi.

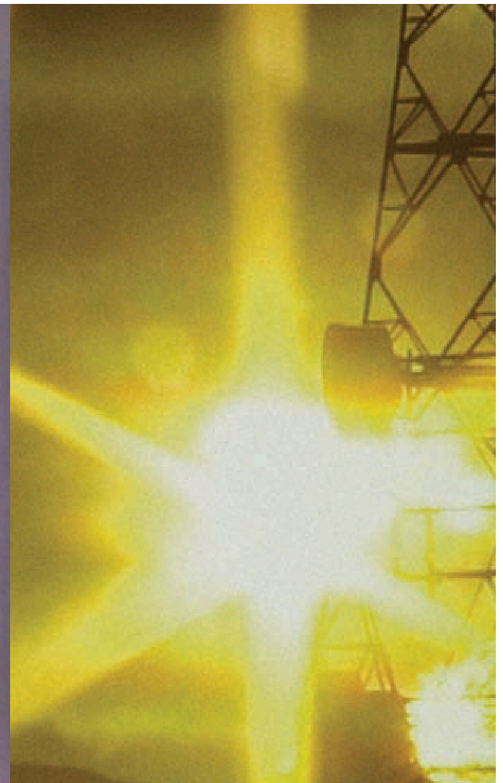
united different sectors of Burmese society in a pro-democracy movement that prefigured the mass demonstrations of 2007, similarly crushed by state violence.

The works in this series eschew the spoken word in favour of minimalist captions and meaning built through creative treatment of image and sound. In *Ma Win Maw Oo*, a silent video, pools of throbbing, saturated colour are slowly revealed, as the computer digitally zooms out, to be a still photograph of the dead child carried by two medical students. Kanwar breaks down the digital video image to its component technical elements, foregrounding the pixels and the pulsation that results when a freeze frame effect is applied to an interlaced signal. This conceit impacts head and heart simultaneously. It draws our attention to the materiality of the media of documentation — photography and video — so that we understand the picture as an artefact, a representation. Even so, this eerie movement that simulates, but is clearly not, life poignantly gestures to the child's beating heart stilled by brutality.

HENNINGSVAER

This short film, shot on the eponymous Norwegian cod fishing island in the Arctic Circle, is often described as a meditation on exile and the thin line between paradise and prison. The first half features beautifully composed long takes of the barren northern landscape. The ribs of a window frame, raindrops trickling down the pane and reflections of a lone figure in the glass assert the spatial difference between the interior viewpoint of the camera and the wild exterior. The lapping of waves, the bellowing of a ship's horn, and the gentle crackling of a fireplace emphasize the quiet and isolation of the foreign setting. But near the halfway point, the film echoes the opening shot of arrival on a boat, this time to an island in the subcontinent, a forested one of dull yellow and green instead of silver and grey. Is it memory and yearning, or does the film suggest that exile is not only a condition of far-off places but one that can also occur at home?

HENNINGSVAER, 2006, 15 minutes



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