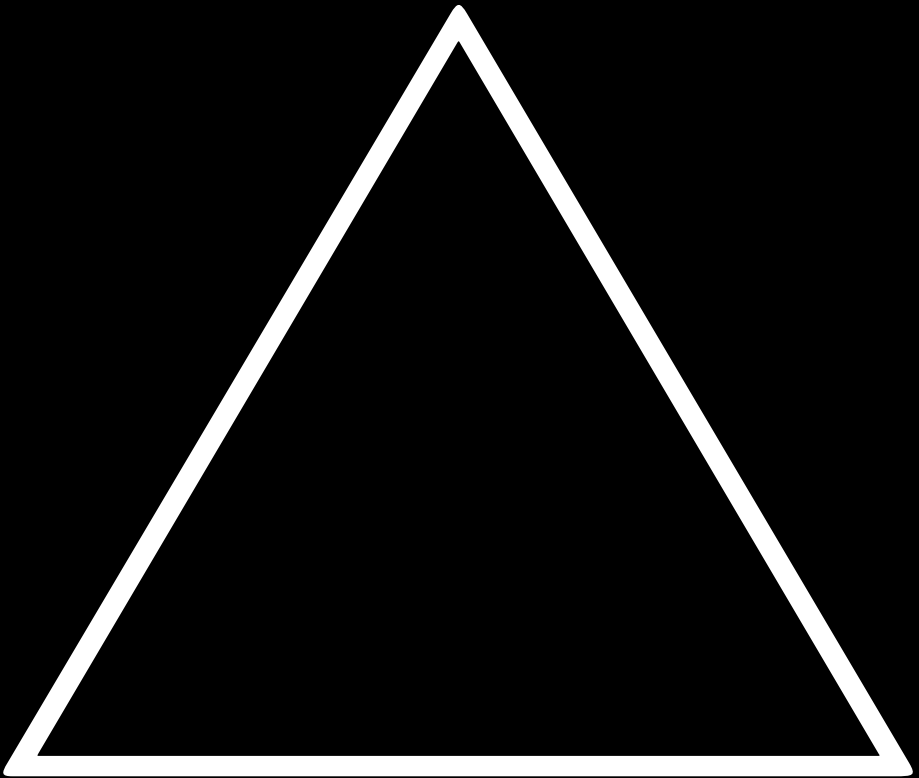


BLACK
SUN



BLACK SUN ALCHEMY, DIASPORA AND HETEROTOPIA

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BLIND SPOT,
ON THE METAPHOR OF THE SUN:
LIGHT, LANGUAGE AND
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Shezad Dawood · Tom Trevor · Megha Ralapati · Gerrie van Noord
Kodwo Eshun · Camilla Palestra · Oliver Knight · Rory McGrath

Devi Art Foundation · Arnolfini · Ridinghouse



Fig. 16



Fig. 17

72d

Ashish Avikunthak, *Kalighat Fetish*, 1999
featuring Kaushik Gangopadhya

Ansel Adams, *The Black Sun, Tungsten Hills,
Owens Valley, California*, 1939





ent meaning here, in that every second captured is a unique second, a moment, a look, a style, a building that represents human history, a period, and it makes visible our constructed world. With *En Route* I could gather footage from this one collection and combine it with spools and reels from other collections, from which I could then begin to construct the palimpsest of worlds that existed in mid-century urban India. Having lived in different countries and always felt not quite at home anywhere, it is like gathering the bits and pieces of my dispersed sense of self, identities gathered and discarded, written over and fused like layers of wet paper... I like the idea of doing that with the film I find: creating a kind of composite character of a time.

CP

In *I Saw a God Dance* (2011) you work with film footage from 1939 on Ram Gopal, a twentieth-century Indian dancer and choreographer who performed extensively abroad. Your encounter with Gopal was a pure accident; you had never heard of him until you found his film footage in a plastic bag in an old house about to be demolished. There seems to be a fascination with abandoned material that in your hands becomes subject to a fluid transformation. This reminds me of Maya Deren's 'Abandoned Films' and I wonder how her work resonates with you.

AA

Maya Deren's notion of abandoned film resonates with me beyond the term found footage. It is the fun involved in the making and the process, the time spent with family in goofy moments over the weekend that is important. Tom Daguir's footage of Ram Gopal reveals an attempt to invent a tradition and have this 'contemporary' dance filmed, at a

time when film was relatively new. Finding this footage so many years later in such an abandoned state meant that there is more than official history and that it would need to be reshaped... That fluidity is very important to me, because it allows me to feel the footage and reshape it as though it was a ball of clay. In that process history begins to unfold. Finding the film was one of those fortuitous encounters in my neighbourhood. It gave me the visuals for an interview I had done with the filmmaker, who was in his 90s and died soon after. It is very important for me to gather subject matter from around me, from below as it were, and this scavenging for media, and working with ethnography and documentary as gathering tools has been a way of working that evolved very slowly, without me really knowing what I am doing for the most part.

CP

From a God dancing on a terrace down to the abyss of *Through the Dark Mine* (2013), your most recent film set in and around the mines in the Kolar district, India: the film follows the miners as they dig and plunge into the earth. How does this 'experience of seeing in space and time' reflect on our world?

AA

The juxtaposition of the mine in use and the stillness of the landscape of a mine that has been closed sets a mood of stillness and movement, of light and dark spaces, of the interior and exterior, of surface and depth. I have walked this derelict landscape many times now. Police and security guard it, and yet it is as though all life has come to a halt or been paused. It's very still and strange. On the one hand it is a space that is intimately crafted, welded and carved out, and yet the black holes of the vents that

dive thousands of feet below the ground make it so bizarre and surreal, as do the mounds of cyanide waste used over a hundred years to extract the gold from the ore. Contemporary day-to-day life is framed by the mounds, which even became a film set, while we were there. That confrontation with a land that has been so denuded, stripped and ravaged is powerful.

The installation I am working on attempts to juxtapose these two sets of found footage; one from when Ram Gopal was inventing dance for proscenium theatre and the other of the mine on the eve of its closure. Both spaces—the terrace and the mine—become a theatre for performance in which the elements of how our modern world comes together is revealed by the amateurs' camera and eye for capturing the banal and the extraordinary. Interpretation as an intervention is integral to the process.

ASHISH AVIKUNTHAK
(pp.102–05)

EXCHANGE WITH SHEZAD DAWOOD

SD

How much of a part do ideas of transformation and alchemy play in the thinking behind your work? I'm thinking not just of the employment of structuralist film techniques in tandem with devotees cross-dressing in order to embody Kali Ma in *Kalighat Fetish* (1999), but also of the key image of the helicopter, which, although a strong image of modernity, also becomes transformed into an archaic and ossified winged entity, almost breaking out of the fabric of myth.

AA

A lot of my work is intuitively driven. The thinking process is primarily non-thought and spontaneous, and my practice is hugely aimed at achieving that. *Kalighat Fetish* took about a year to make. I had two ideas in my mind. The first was the Bahuruopee (literally 'multiple-forms')—the ritual cross-dresser. The second was the ritual of animal sacrifice.

Ritual cross-dressing is very common in Bengal, especially among lower caste devotees. It is not uncommon to see Bahuruopees in Calcutta inhabiting the banal and daily—in trains, buses, street-corners, ghats and other public places. I come from a middle-class Hindu family, fairly embedded in a religious world, living in a city like Calcutta, where divine figures, religious symbols and mythic objects infuse the urban, everyday world. In this world where divinity existed in modernity, the Bahuruopee epitomised the mythic ontology. He was emblematic of a mythic reality. The divine and the mythic was with us.

The ritual of animal sacrifice is a form of transgression that has fascinated me since I was a child and I would go to the Kalighat temple in Calcutta. The film thus takes these two elements as the core and transforms it into a narrative. It is not so much an alchemy as it is a metamorphosis. A transformation in which the vestige of the earlier haunts the new.

SD

Something similar also happens for me in *Vakratunda Swaha* (2010), through reverse-motion in counterpoint to the presence of the sea, and the iconography of the gas mask as modern deity-fetish. When composing your films, I see your editing process as being more one of composition, so please correct me if I'm wrong in this assumption: what balance

of intention and intuition usually informs your method? And what other factors are at play for you?

AA

Vakratunda began as requiem to a dead friend, it ended as a theology on death. From an elegy it was transformed into a ritual. The allegory of double death is the emblematic kernel of the film – ceremonial sacrifice of Ganesh in devotional fervour for the inevitable resurrection, and the irreversible death of Girish Dahiwalé never to be resurrected. The devotee is dead, but the divine is reborn. The tension between certitude of the death and the redemption of reincarnation forms the theological imperative of the film. In this religious narrative Ganapati becomes the key godhead, through which the ambivalence of death and resurrection is played out. Ganapati is both death and divinity. He is both that which dies and that which is reborn. He is simultaneously both malevolent and benevolent. He is one that gives life and snatches it away. And the same is the case with the gas mask within the iconographic representation of modernity; it is both the symbol of death and what protects from death. I do not look at it as fetish, but at the fact this ambivalence is its generative semiotic.

The balance of intention and intuition is something that is precarious. I had nearly six hours of footage to make a 22-minute film. The 22 minutes were a structural constraint that I had given myself, because I wanted the film to be on one 35mm reel (around 2,000 feet). It was with this constraint that I started to work with my editor, and we worked for three weeks and got the narrative out. The editing was essentially intuitive and we let the images decide the nature of the film's flow. There was intention, but intuition took over from the intentionality.

SD

What I also find interesting is the fact that your work, for me, is not merely concerned with the document of ritual, but an actual stepping across. Inhabiting and activating the diurnal, rather than skipping along the surface: how would you respond to this or articulate it further?

AA

I am interested in the mythic more than the mythological. The distinction is that the mythological is bound within a narrative realm, whereas the mythic is more ephemeral, almost transient and ungraspable. The mythological has to play itself out within the framework of a story, linear or circular, whereas the mythic works at the level of an idea. The mythic is intuitive and it does not have to be understood as narrative, but it has to be experienced. A ritual is mythic. A gesture is mythic. In order to be recognised, the mythic does not have to be experienced within the realm of the known. It is that which can be subterranean, secretive, unknown, hidden, but it can still be recognised as such. I think of my films as mythic, not as mythological.

I think of my work with *Kalighat Fetish* as a process through which I explore my own religiosity. It started with *Etcetera*: the films are an essential exploration of existence through a contemplation of the ritual. *Etcetera* was a philosophical response to this need of mine. Here the rituals are secular. They are devoid of any religious connotation. It is with *Kalighat Fetish* that I find ritual in the religious context, as a metaphysical exploration of life. With *Vakratunda Swaha* it was more a conscious process. The stylistic device that I employ to explore this cinema of religiosity is an aesthetic and political idiom that I call mythic realism.

MATTI BRAUN (pp.106–10)

WORDS BY TOM TREVOR

German-Finnish artist Matti Braun creates layered installations that allow objects from one culture to come into contact with those of another, resulting in intentional misunderstandings. Working with a diverse range of formal techniques and materials, including silk paintings, glass sculptures, textiles, ceramics and prints, Braun investigates the transit of aesthetic forms and practices across different traditions and cultural contexts. The point of departure for his work is often based on the stories and histories of specific people or ideas, but abstracts away from these into the artist's own formal and conceptual explorations. While referencing different craft traditions or contemporaneous aesthetic practices, Braun focuses on moments of intense exchange between global cultures. He is interested in the way in which meaning shifts between these different contexts, and the cultural misunderstandings that arise in the process, exploring their impact on forms and ideas, and the way in which they elucidate social and aesthetic developments that may have been buried or overlooked. By single-mindedly following his research interests in specific individuals, the development of their ideas and the constellation of relationships around them, Braun builds up an eclectic mesh of concepts that have come to form a challenge to conventional interpretations of Modernity.

Central to Braun's practice is a particular approach to referencing. Certain images, objects or names are deliberately cited, as part of his associative methodology, but it is left open to the viewer to trace conceptual relationships between

the different elements of the exhibition. They can be read as purely formal arrangements of artefacts, or as glimpses of an extensive rhizomatic network of ideas and cultural practices. For example, Braun has long been interested in Indian culture and its relationship to Modernity, and a specific artefact that has held his interest is the 'patola', a brightly coloured woven silk saree originating in Gujarat. As valuable objects, patolas travelled through international trading routes from the twelfth century onwards. Many patolas now in western textile collections are actually replicas of these rare originals, but this did not matter as they maintained their exchange value, circulating internationally as a form of currency. Braun's copies, which make no attempt to disguise the fact that they are prints, play on the productivity of the relationship between tradition and modernisation, the local and the global, by allowing the effects of appropriation to take some formal control of the work. Whether we view these artefacts, in the context of the gallery, as isolated aesthetic objects or as metonyms for intercultural exchange is open to interpretation.

Another of Braun's project that focuses on Indian Modernity is the large-scale installation *R.T./S.R./V.S.* (2003–), taking its inspiration from an unrealised film by the renowned Bengali filmmaker Satyajit Ray, entitled *The Alien*. Ray's script, written in 1967, tells the story of an extra-terrestrial being who crash-lands into a lotus pond close to a remote Bengali village. The mischievous alien plays a series of pranks on the villagers, which are seen as miracles, and the community begins worshipping his spacecraft as a temple risen from the depths of the earth. As the alien causes confusion in the small village, the script points towards the conflicts that occur