

Trial and Error

A group show at Khoj addresses the silences, erasures and cover-ups in a world riddled with war, surveillance, big data and post-truth politics, avers **Adwait Singh**.



Bani Abidi. *Memorial to Lost Words.* Sound and sculptural installation, eight-channel audio, 25 marble slabs with engraved text. 2017–18. Photograph by Arsh Grewal. Image courtesy Khoj International Artists' Association and Experimenter, Kolkata.

Following on the heels of a simulated court hearing, *Landscape as Evidence: Artist as Witness*, staged by Khoj in collaboration with Zuleikha Chaudhuri in April 2017 to protest against the recently sanctioned River Linking Project, the exhibition *This Must be True* curated by Mario D'Souza, Mila Samdub and Radha Mahendru at Khoj Studios, New Delhi, from the 28th of January to the 11th of March, attempts to open up 'witness' as a term, as employed by scientific, legal paradigms by qualifying it with claims that are artistic, subjective and local, underscoring the possibilities and merits of other modes of 'witnessing'.

The exhibition seeks to blur the borders between art and law, wishfully, by including this elaborate performance at the Constitution Club of India that saw participation by professional law practitioners, but also through the

inclusion of artworks that mobilise law enforcement methodologies and investigative infrastructures. The essayistic format proffers different kinds of evidence for examination from different vantages, posing some fundamental questions to its audience.

Who gets to represent oneself before the law? While Chaudhuri in conjunction with the artists Ravi Agarwal, Navjot Altaf and Sheba Chhachhi petition the jury on behalf of the environment jeopardised by the government's extensive civil engineering project to sync and harvest different water systems across the country, Susan Schuppli's *Slick Images* and *Nature Represents Itself* lets nature usurp the prerogative of representation as a form of 'natural cinema' that is its own corpus delicti. This 'photogenic' 'archive of material wrongs' stitched together

from a variety of media ranging from satellite imagery to CGI animation and recovered feed of subsurface plumes resulting from The Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, makes the case for the terrifying technicolour slickness of this environmental catastrophe to speak for itself as compelling material evidence.

To further emphasize the adequacy of nature in testifying for itself, the artist borrows from Latin American and indigenous frameworks where nature worshipped as Pachamama is allowed agency to act in its own interest. These are incorporated in the form of an audio outlining the details of a lawsuit filed on behalf of Pachamama against the perpetrator British Petroleum. One can, of course, still question the relevance of anthropocentric legal frameworks within which nature is expected to appear as witness. On the other hand, one can assert the validity of these frameworks by abnegating the spurious distinction between man and nature, and reconstituting the need for ecological preservation as a vested interest in assuring the contingent continuation of our species in the larger scheme of nature.

How to represent precarity without compromising it? Works by Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Pallavi Paul and Bani Abidi engage with the complications arising from the vicissitudes of memory in building incrimination against violence, especially in cases where memory, impaired or otherwise, is the only recourse to evidence. Abu Hamdan's listening room *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)* relies on oral testimonies by former detainees to recreate an acoustic architecture of the Syrian prison of Saydnaya, otherwise inaccessible to media scrutiny, that has been transformed, as the narrator puts it, 'from a prison to a death camp' where over 17,000 political prisoners have perished since the start of the civil war in 2011. The missing 19 decibel is an index of the drop in the whisper at Saydnaya after 2011, that is offered up as a measure of increase in state oppression inside the internment facility where silence is routinely weaponised as a technology of torture forcing the detainees to limit their conversation to barely audible whispers.

A shroud of secrecy also envelops Paul's *Attempts, Incitements, Etc.* An installation that excavates the 'alchemical charge' of memory, stringing together a comprehensive, if incomprehensible account of the goings on at Bletchley Park, England, in an attempt to lift off the cloud of mystery that surrounds this former headquarter of strategists and codebreakers during the World War II. Recently released from the Official Secrets Act, the wartime signatories comprising an army of typists, radio operators, code breakers and clerks find

themselves free for the first time to divulge details of their service. The secrets that were once guarded with dear life, no longer deemed dangerous, come out as broken stutters, lengthy silences, false starts, confused recollections, misarticulations and digressions, putting an expiration date on truth.

Abidi similarly reanimates the barely-remembered history of participation of Indian soldiers in the First World War. The 25 marble epitaphs and sonic score comprising *Memorial to Lost Words* seek to reconstruct the collective memory of this event with the aid of censored letters from the soldiers and songs sung by women naming the hope for their speedy return, adding nuance to the picture that fails to note much else besides their valiant loyalty and service to the British crown. Throughout this epistolary investigation, the fear of censorship spurs with banal desires – for a flute, some hash or news from a lover – and is eventually overcome by way of a direct entreaty to the censoring eye to spare the letter itself after obliterating sensitive information.

The final segment of the show casts self-doubt on the practice of collective witnessing and remote spectatorship, chartering the territory of deepfake, rumour mongering, and 'algorithmic terror' to shed light on the contemporary manufacture and manipulation of truth by different players. Ala Younis' stereoscopic study *Pat – riot – against the slow cancellation of the future* trains its enquiry on an image economy of competing truths and propaganda circulating in the specific contexts of the 1977 bread riots in Egypt and the influx of Iraqi refugees into Jordan following the Gulf War in 1990. By referencing a film that cast a single actor in multiple roles and decoupling the word 'pat-riot' to enunciate the slim difference between a patriotic revolutionary and a mean rioter, the work offers an ambivalent account of the riots in 1977. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Level of Confidence* replays the memory of trauma by re-deploying face-recognition algorithms and surveillance software commonly used by the police to identify criminals, in a tireless search for 43 students who were mass-kidnapped from a Mexican school and likely killed. In its dogged denial of amnesia, the work endeavours to keep the memory of this event from being buried under the morbid mountain of data that grows by the day. Like Younis' origamic dollars denoting the sly strings that come attached to the support offered by agents such as the IMF and the World Bank, the works in this segment caution us against Trojan horses disguised as truth and the sundry possibilities of abuse at the juncture where evidence meets big data. /