

## 01 / GOA

## Monuments of the Contemporary

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The separation of workers from the means of production has witnessed an unprecedented burgeoning of the service class chained to the tempo of immaterial labour in an endless regeneration of the experience economy that has come to characterise the cannibalising carnival that capitalism has become today. Not only is the word ‘separation’ operative here in the sense of dispossession but also indicates a physical sequestering or relocation of the means of production away from the digital natives busily negotiating data on their black mirrors. The factory lines have been abandoned, production units banished and the hands kept under the strictest of manicure regimens have long since given up their function as markers of social identity<sup>1</sup>. The vanishing of technological materiality (as with people) or more precisely its progressive smoothening and compacting is the predictable outcome of our civilisational preoccupations with ‘beauty’ and ‘order’. “Dirt is matter out of place” propounds the anthropologist Mary Douglas, and our avoidance of it suggests a “creative movement” to impose order on our environment<sup>2</sup>. It seems that our reality has become sleek like our screens, all striations ironed-out, made-over, dealt-with, and dirt safely brushed under the carpet, flushed-out, outsourced in hoards-upon-mighty-hoards to be recycled, incinerated, dumped, and somehow lost in the convoluted bowels of the developing economies, but has it?

Whilst engaged in our daily commerce on the internet, downloading and releasing terrible bytes of information into the expanding bivouac that is the World Wide Web, we rarely pause to visualise the extensive trans-geographic network of technological ontologies – satellites, server racks, routers, processors, hard-drives, ventilation mechanisms, fibre optic cables, power generators – that subtend high-speed data transmission. Much like the packaged food flipped into our shopping carts during periodical trips to the nearest ASDA or Tesco, the present-day user-consumer prefers to stay aloof from the technologies/ sites of production and processing; the endemic insularity and indifference feeding off the capitalist aesthetic of abstraction that cultivates collective cultural blind spots. In fact, the ‘zombies of immaterial labour’<sup>3</sup>, a term used by Lars Bang Larsen to designate



Allan deSouza, *Rumpty-Tumpty Series #6*, Digital prints from film, 50.8 x 76.2 centimetres, 1997/2017. Image courtesy: The artist and Talwar Gallery, New York and New Delhi.

minimal seating, encouraging one to only watch enough to understand the symbolic importance of Rigdol’s feat. Overall, these displays were a disservice, as they also presented works by Mariam Ghani (*Kabul 2, 3, 4*, 2002–2007) and Naeem Mohaiemen (*Abu Ammar is Coming*, 2016) two intelligent, research-based artists who have shown in large black boxes in the past two Documentas. While there was egalitarianism between established and emerging artists, works needed more space, and the exhibition could have benefited from the entire second floor.

Display aside, the show does succeed in moving away from the new-art-from-elsewhere standard by showcasing works that reference both artists’ countries of origin, and diverse conceptual, political, and formal interests. It also includes older works by mid-career artists. Shahzia Sikander’s *The World Is Yours, the World Is Mine* (2014), a painting of poet Langston Hughes and hip-hop artist Nas in her notable reconfigured Indo-Persian miniature style, highlights the importance of these New York storytellers in her practice.<sup>2</sup> Zarina’s nine woodcut prints *These Cities Blotted into the Wilderness (Adrienne Rich after Ghalib)* (2003), presents the maps of torn cities including Beirut, Ahmedabad, and New York — her gashes into the wood stressing the structural violence embedded in these locales.

Of course, these artists are not from elsewhere, they all reside in the U.S. Jaret Vadera’s *Emperor of No Country* (2016), a map with all geographic or political locations removed, challenges the validity of any regional identifier. Vadera sews the map’s fabric into a jacket, perhaps indicating how these artists inherently wear their places of birth, residences, and often ethnicities; information noted in wall labels and central to identity shows like this one. Still, in the U.S., where racial and ethnic circumstances are placed upon minority groups — seen most recently with the Muslim travel-ban and the rise of white supremacy — a South Asian Diaspora exhibition can and should continue to explore what it means for such a show to occur in American cultural institutions.

## Endnotes

- 1 Holland Cotter, “Taking a Magical Flight Through Modern India,” *The New York Times*, March 4, 2005.
- 2 Shahzia Sikander, “The World Is Yours, the World Is Mine,” *The New York Times*, December 04, 2014.

‘Lucid Dreams and Distant Visions: South Asian Art in the Diaspora’, 27 June — 6 August, 2017, Asia Society, New York.



Benitha Perciyal, *The Ordinary and the Divine*, Installation with wood, lime stucco, coconut leaves, myrobalan seeds, jaggery, sand, copper, brick, stone vessel, sea lime and rock lime vessels holding raw materials of lime stucco, 2016-17.



Sheba Chhachhi, *Neelkanth: Poison/Nectar*, Installation comprising 260 aluminium light boxes with B&W pigment prints, four translights, and a looped video (silent): 5 minutes 35 seconds, 2000-02.

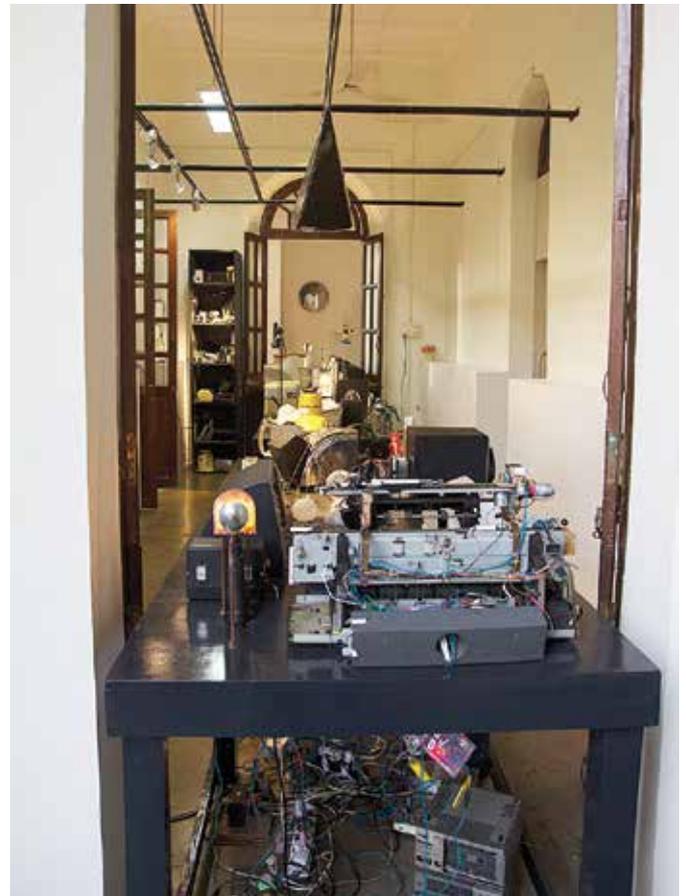
the subjects under capitalism today, have transformed into compulsive aesthetes, allowing in measured flows of the world through beautifying filters incorporated via heavy interface with the social media. To be sure, one cannot imagine an existence without our domesticated machinic partners, displaced lovers that bleep, blink, flash, whistle, and act out from their respective corners in our homes. However, there is such a thing as the technological other that we fail to assimilate, account for, befriend, to say nothing of the overpowering presence of discarded materiality, landfills, space junk, error logs, cookies and spams that have become a defining feature of the contemporary landscape. Hulking dams and power plants, foreboding pylons radiating tentacular arms of transmission, dystopic stretches of solar farms, torturous turbines, diabolical dynamos, ophidian oil rigs, and last but not the least the material left-overs of their hellish feast on Earth in the form of amassed archaeologies of waste – these then are the true markers of an age, monuments to an infinitely insidious system-with-seemingly-no-outsides. Two distinguishing features of these contemporary monuments must be noted here: unlike the monuments of old that were glamorous tokens of commemoration, the (anti-) monuments of today are anonymous sites of amnesia and the replacement of their symbolic functions with utilitarian ones, in keeping with the defensive instinct to shield oneself from the uncontrollable detonation of information, the ‘archival impulse’ as Derrida calls it, and the capitalist logic of productivity. Terms of endearment such as ‘stupid machine’ that we are wont to greet our domestic appliances with simply fail in the face of the monumental feeling of alienation induced by these imposing technological and garbological marvels, the reason for their hasty consigning to the black hole(s) of consciousness. The technological/discarded other is so heavy in its ‘thingness’ that it defies animation, interactivity and hence domestication, wherein lies its potential for destabilising. It is this ‘radical

indeterminacy’ encapsulated by technological waste and wasting technology that is harnessed by a recent exhibition entitled ‘Detritus: Matter out of Place’ curated by Vidya Shivadas for the Serendipity Arts Festival 2017.

Housed in the former Goa Medical College and Hospital building complex (Asia’s first medical institute), ‘Detritus’ irradiates critical explorations around ‘waste’ in the past decades undertaken by art practitioners such as Moonis Ahmad Shah, BV Suresh, Sheba Chhachhi, Vivian Sundaram, Priya Ravish Mehra, Benitha Perciyal, Sudharak Olwe, Ruby Chishti, Susanta Mandal, Babu Eshwar Prasad, Jahangir Asgar Jani and Kausik Mukhopadhyay. In other words, the exhibition narrates the lay of post-Independence urbanisation in the country through its “disjecta membra that has made the transition from thrift to throwaway in a matter of decades.”<sup>24</sup> Through questions such as ‘what monuments will this moment produce?’<sup>25</sup> the exhibition effects an encounter with the abject in technological terms as well as the enormity of jettisoned superfluity, a bi-product of our urban and industrial enterprise. For instance, Jahangir Jani’s *Batin* series of relief sculptures can be compared to the museumised displays of material cultures, with each tablet representing a petrified physiognomic portrait of humanity through the ages. The crafted materiality of these relief sculptures is emphasised as indexical traces of an ascribed culture and can be read as “an alphabet of thingness and uncertainty, wound and healing, belief and doubt, inviting us to decipher it.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Kausik Mukhopadhyay’s mechanical assemblages laid-bare lull us into lowering our guards through their surficial domestic familiarity, before besetting us with their (mal)functioning hybridity. In our overwhelmingly technologically governed universe where technical breakdown is the very incarnation of abject horror, a sudden plunge into the boisterous cacophony engendered by a machinic Saturnalia and the baffling overabundance

of exposed gadgetry and cross wiring assails our senses and attention, invoking inventive nightmares from science fiction featuring angry devices exacting revenge. Another artist BV Suresh displaces the metaphor of ‘dirt’ onto the subaltern that resists being put in place. The peripatetic rag that swoops down to sweep only to leave a trail of dispersed dirt in its Sisyphean enterprise, comprising the kinetic sculpture *Once Bitten Twice Shy*, seems to rehearse the incessant vacillation between the Foucauldian dyad of power and resistance. The action plays out against the changed political scenario where terrorism and paternalising rhetoric, symbolised by the proliferation of random signage warning about the menace of crocodiles in the riverine surrounds of Baroda, are deployed as tropes of subordination by the authorities. Suresh’s *Chronicles of Silence* is an anthem for the marginalised cotton workers in Gujrat, most of whom hail from impoverished Muslim families. A disconcerting production-unit-gone-haywire summoned from a dystopian dimension, appears to be locked in a *Dance Macabre* of its own orchestration. The meta-narrative of State hegemony is invoked, but only as broken transmissions rasping off moribund transistors littered on the floor to be swallowed in the discordant dirge produced by mutated farm implements – mechanised cotton gins, beaters, winnowers, trash-filled chicken-coops on rotary, crashing weights, and projected interference irradiating the albino peacock which stands in as a majestic emblem for the dispossessed. There is an attempt to reactivate the hauntological on a technological plane elsewhere in the exhibition as evidenced in Susanta Mandal’s romancing of antiquated photographic apparatuses such as the Magic Lantern configured to conjure ghosts of the erased through a reconstruction of cinematic memory. Further, the gothic element is prominent in works such as Moonis Ahmad Shah’s *The Birds Are Coming* which exorcises a fictional archive of migratory birds from Kashmir documenting their attributes and circumstances of death with the view to upending the ‘taxonomies of terror’ and calling forth a full-blown Hitchcockian insurgency terrorising the borders of the ‘here’. It would be superfluous to spell out the metaphor connecting the birds to the lost civilians in the turbulent land that is Kashmir where the invocation of the paranormal can be read as an extreme measure to reclaim agency on the part of the precariat. Extant socio-cultural hierarchies are inverted and values called into question in works such as Benitha Perciyal’s *The Ordinary and the Divine*, ingenious in its naïve deconstruction of the deific body and foregrounding of its ageing, haptic, and odorous materiality. Similarly, Vivan Sundaram’s video *The Brief Ascension of Marian Hussain* appears to exalt a landfill to the level of the sacred, such that the ofial functions as a technology of transcendence eliciting an ecstatic, balletic response out of its protagonist. Another

such intervention is performed through the playful sculptures from *Gagawaka: Making Strange* series where the quotidian – rubber tyres, corrugated sheets, synthetic hair, soles of shoes, laces – is carried over to the resplendent halls of fashion as a queer, parodical presence. The stupendous archaeologies of anthropogenic trash are contrasted with mounds of expended soil referred to as ‘Cyanaide betta’ characterising the mining desolation in Babu Eshwar Prasad’s *Notes from Underground*. Carrying a strong charge of the sublime amplified by an eerie chthonic score, the exposed pedology of Kolar gold mines appeals to that most primal of fears i.e. obsolescence – what is soil that is so denuded of life, so complete in its entropy that not a blade of grass can grow in it? It brings to mind a recent performance by Shweta Bhattad *The Barren Orgasm* (VAG, July 2017) that confronted the viewer with the imagery of a heaving, retching Earth curdled with the indiscriminate use of agrochemicals and toxins. The theme of toxicity is further investigated by Sheba Chhachhi’s installation *Neelkanth: Poison/Nectar* that situates a convulsing throat trying to contain/ assimilate poison in reference to a mythological episode<sup>7</sup>, at the centre of an urban topography crowding the gaping/ gulping/ gasping sensorium.



Kausik Mukhopadhyay, *Squeeze Lime in your Eyes*, Installation with wood, metal, plastic, electrical components, electrical timer, computer monitors, light bulbs and oven, 2012-17.

Not only does the exhibition aim to jolt us out of our rehearsed apathies through a violent confrontation with the abject and the channelling of the radical destabilising potential carried by unassimilable technology and garbage, it also attempts to bridge the gap between the user-consumer and the sites of production/ disposal as in Sudhakar Olwe's *In Search of Dignity and Justice: The Untold Story of Mumbai's Conservancy Workers* that forces an acknowledgement of the inglorious lives and entire timelines determined around a metropolis's refuse without whom our privileged world would be rendered dysfunctional in short order. Propelling towards a more humanising relationship with these alienating archaeologies, tested feminist techniques such as sewing, stitching and darning are mined for positive affect in the practice of artists such as Ruby Chishti and Priya Ravish Mehra. The spatial context of the former hospital appears specially to energise Chishti's ragdolls that are reflections of her experience as a care-giver, a source of succour and endurance for the 'castoffs and the ailing'. Similarly, the leitmotif of 'invisible-repair' and reuse is active throughout Ravish Mehra's collaborative works with the *rafoogars* (darners) of Najibabad, again an affirmation of the appeal of the fragile.

- 1 See Diane Atkinson's *Love and Dirt: The Marriage of Arthur Munby and Hannah Cullwick*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- 2 Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concept of pollution and Taboo*, 2. London and New York: Routledge, 1984 (1966).
- 3 See Lars Bang Larsen 'Zombies of Immaterial Labor: The Modern Monster and the Death of Death' in the *E-flux Journal* # 15 - April 2010. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/15/61295/zombies-of-immaterial-labor-the-modern-monster-and-the-death-of-death/>
- 4 See Ranjit Hoskote's catalogue essay "The Animism of the Machine: Kausik Mukhopadhyay's Autobiography in moving Parts" accompanying the exhibition 'Squeeze Lime in Your Eye' at Chatterjee and Lal, Mumbai, 2017.
- 5 As attributed to Babu Eshwar Prasad in the exhibition text.
- 6 See Nancy Adajania's curatorial essay accompanying the exhibition 'Sacred/ Scared' at Latitude 28, New Delhi, 2014.
- 7 Where Shiva tries to rescue life by containing the poison in his throat thereby earning the epithet 'Neelkanth' or the blue-throated. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samudra\\_manthan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samudra_manthan)

'Detritus: Matter Out of Place', curated by Vidya Shivadas, 15 - 22 December 2017, Old GMC Complex, Goa.

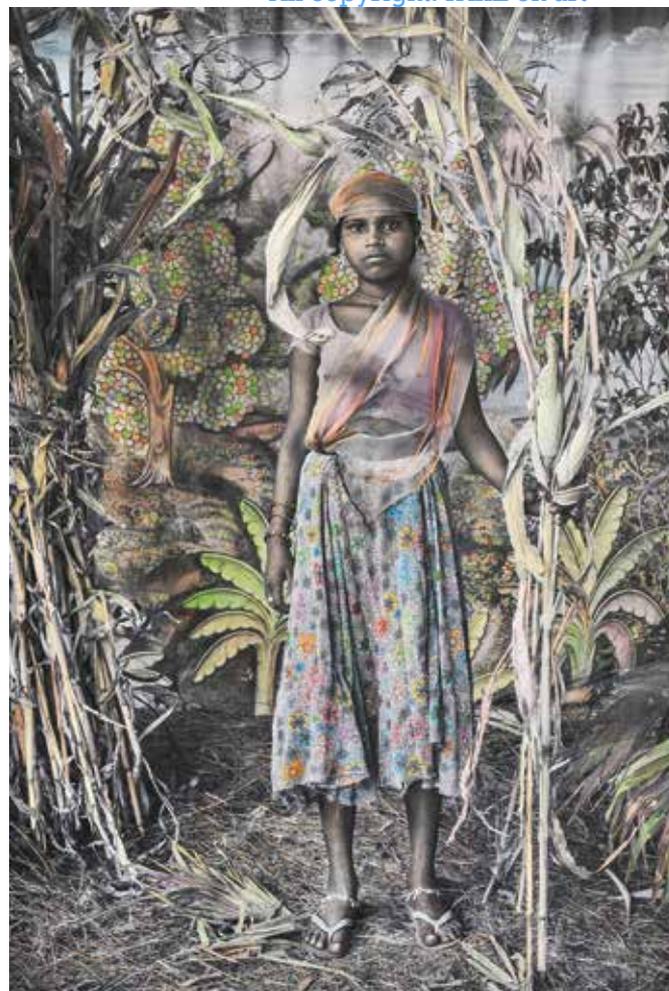
All images courtesy: Serendipity Arts Foundation and the curator.

## 01 / DELHI

### When My Exotic is Your Authentic<sup>1</sup>

#### Premjish Achari

In the fragments of narratives that we read in *A Short Story of Sorts* written by Waswo in the catalogue, the character Photo-wallah encounters his academic nemesis the Anaemic Academic who is armed with the *Book of Said*, and he is charged with aiming his little ethnographer's lens 'at one of our less fortunates'. While Photo-wallah tries to explain that he has



Waswo X. Waswo (with Rajesh Soni), *Girl with Field Corn*, Hand-coloured black and white digital print, 2008. Image courtesy: Tasveer

received the consent to photograph the The-Man-Who-Sold-Hara-Dhania, she goes on to accuse him of seeing his subject as not a human being, but as a specimen. One who is filtered through the nostalgic sepia-infected mind, a representative of the rural ideal. The Photo-wallah is the self-referential fictional character or the pseudonym employed by artist Waswo X Waswo, very similar to the character Evil Orientalist, which he has used in many of his other works to provoke discussions on Orientalism and the colonial gaze, through the subject-position of a 'neo-colonial oppressor'. Instead, the Anaemic Academic is the representative of post-colonial theory, armed with Edward Said's *Orientalism*, referred here as the *Book of Said*, akin to the gospel which one should follow diligently. At the heart of the controversy surrounding Waswo's depiction of Indian subjects as his critics observe, whether in his photographs or paintings, is the ethnographic gaze, the hegemonic position of the white man. Aijaz Ahmed has painstakingly exposed the European influences behind Said's theories, especially the methodological influence of Auerbach and the extensive use of Foucault's notion of knowledge, discourse and power, his forceful homogenizing of the oriental experience, etc. The post-colonial moment in India too is the playground of