

SEARCHING SUBJECTIVITIES IN VIDEO INSTALLATIONS OF AMAR KANWAR

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Amar Kanwar, *The Lightning Testimonies*, 2007

ABSTRACT

The essay views the video installation as an apparatus that lightens multiple subjectivities. By illustrating two works of Amar Kanwar, the essay elaborates on various positions of the audience, the methodologies used by Kanwar in proposing different ways of viewing to generate different subjective experiences. This also offers an analysis of video installation to re-define post-medium according to engagement with the art object and not in its making.

KEYWORDS

Video installation | Subjectivity | Apparatus | Post-media

INTRODUCTION

Installation art can be many things arranged in a particular fashion. Though the practice has been around since Dadaism, the term came up only recently to describe an experiential, immersive and sensorial space created by an artist. Not always pertaining to a particular medium, installation art can be site-specific and interactive. Installation art admits a new form of engagement. As it relies on communication and not representation, it allows the audience members to become participants and a key element of the installation. Unlike painting and sculpture, the installations are made with a specific role of the viewer in mind. The set-up and arrangement of objects takes into account the viewers' position at various levels in the interaction with the installation – first a perceptive observer, then respondent and if highly motivated then a participant. The first stage is like an introduction to the installation. As the audiences enter the installation set-up, they simply observe, even if they have read a description of the work. They get familiar with the set-up, try to

understand its rules and their position in the set-up. I distinguish between the roles of a respondent and a participant. A respondent will respond, reply or at least acknowledge the engagement while a participant will act beyond and outside the installation. In case of latter, the installation becomes an agency to evoke a deeper engagement to the issues or ideas laid out by the installation. The third kind of response is the concern of the essay. As a participant, the audience members become a player in the functioning of art installation as an apparatus.

This essay will elaborate on the form and function of video art installation as an apparatus. Extending ideas of Vilém Flusser and Giorgio Agamben on apparatus, it will explore the act of viewing within the apparatus of installation art in two works of Indian artist Amar Kanwar. In the end conditions of post-medium laid down by Rosalind Krauss are interrogated to propose a new viewing of post-medium.

THE APPARATUS OF INSTALLATION ART

Vilém Flusser identifies apparatus as a human made artefact that is used to create, process and store symbols (Flusser 2004-05, 31, 32). In the post-industrial society more and more specialisation is put into symbol manipulation and production. An apparatus contains several information. The audience members could be interacting with one or many of the possible set of information.

Apparatus, as defined by Flusser takes on the form of a black box with a combination of symbols contained within a program that uses humans as players as well as functionaries (Flusser 2004-05, 31). An artist uses various tools and methodologies in an art installation. It can be a photograph, a set of photographs, video with one or many screens, painting, sculpture by itself or in combination. The audience can interact or just view. The different medium used in the installation already contain a system of encoding symbols. The artist is a

functionary who controls the apparatus of the art installation (Flusser 2004-05, 28). He or she does not need to know how the apparatus functions internally; knowing what input gives what kind of output is enough. Of course, an art installation in itself can contain several smaller apparatuses like a projector and digital screen. The objects employed by the artist functionary be it video, painting, photographs, sculpture, are what Flusser describes as "carriers of information" (Flusser 2004-05, 25). These do not necessarily preserve symbols but communicate meanings, ideas, thoughts or information. The artist here is then the person who works on "work-controlling-apparatuses" (Flusser 2004-05 25). The audience interacting and responding to the installation is present within the installation. They create the installation by becoming 'carriers of information'. This information is amplified with information that they already know. The mind of the audience is constantly trying to make sense

of the information that is given to them. Embedded in layers of meaning, interacting in information laden environment, navigating multiple temporalities, the audience sees it, sees something as something and sees something through something (Seel 2005, 179) within the elements of the installation. The audience sees the elements of installation as images, they see it in relation to the other objects and images present and combine it with their knowledge and understanding to create new information.

While Flusser gives a technical definition of the term apparatus, Agamben invoking Foucault, Heidegger and Hyppolite, elaborates on the socio-political situation created by apparatuses. Foucault's word for apparatus is *dispositif*, which is the system of relations between "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions" (Foucault 1980). He situates the apparatus within sets of power relations. Expanding upon the class of apparatuses given by Foucault, Agamben describes an apparatus to have the capacity to "capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings" (Agamben 2009, 14). Such a broad category allows the smallest of objects like a pen to be an apparatus. The main point in Agamben's definition is the process of subjectification as a result of the relation

between apparatuses and human beings. When the audience are present in the installation, they are constantly negotiating their subjectivities. They enter the installation as a different kind of subject, in the process of responding and interacting produce different subjectivities, and sometimes transform subjectivities.

Since installations deal with contemporary image culture, they are important in generating images that are consumed and circulated. Margaret Morse talks about installation as "an experiment in the redesign of the apparatus that represents our culture to itself: a new disposition of machines that project the imagination onto the world that store, recirculate, and display images; and, a fresh orientation of the body in space and a reformulation of visual and kinaesthetic experience" (Morse 1990, 155).

The cinematic apparatus of moving image is different to the video installation apparatus. Video installations are mediated art forms that are presented in a context. Importantly, here the audio-visual experience is supplemented kinaesthetically that can allow learning not only with the mind, but the body itself (Morse 1990, 158). But what does it mean for the viewer? How does it affect the way the audience 'sees'? What kind of subjectivities does it produce? Can these questions allow us a better understanding of the medium of installation art? Let us analyse two works by Amar Kanwar in these aspects.

INTRODUCTION TO THE WORKS OF AMAR KANWAR

As an artist filmmaker, Amar Kanwar traverses a complex space of various elements that make our contemporary society. Aware of the limitations of documentary films, he is constantly looking to redefine the narrative in order to provide a different experience to the spectator. His soulful, lyrical films have a carefully coded narrative and fixed tempo. The films are about the struggle of power, state abuse, violence and social issues that are personal, social and political. At the heart of his films are people who are subjected to state dominance and violence,

and questions of the individual's relationship to the state and its agents.

Kanwar's quest to present multiple ways of seeing has also taken form of installations. His personal, political and ethical dilemmas propelled him towards a unique methodology (Zyman 2013). This essay will talk about two significant installations by Kanwar – *The Torn First Pages* (2004-2008) and *The Lightning Testimonies* (2007). These installations provide an apparatus that implicate the viewer as a subject in a set of power relations.

THE TORN FIRST PAGES (2004-2008)

The Torn First Pages is an elaborate nineteen screen installation on the Burmese resistance against the military dictatorship. The title taken from Ko Than Htay's gesture of tearing out the first page of all the publications he sold. The first page of books, newspapers or any publication in Myanmar had to carry the slogans of the military regime and a denunciation of democratic forces. Htay was a bookshop owner who tore out the first page of every book. He was imprisoned as a result of the protest.

The installation has three parts. The first part is made up of six films – *The Face*, *Thet Win Aung (a)*, *Thet Win Aung (b)*, *Ma Win Maw Oo*, *The Bodhi Tree* and *Somewhere in May*. *The Face* focusses on the on visit of Senior General Than Shwe, Supreme head of the Burmese Military dictatorship on 25 October 2004 to Rajghat, the memorial of Mahatma Gandhi in Delhi. *Thet Win Aung (a)* and *Thet Win Aung (b)* are about a dynamic young leader who was sentenced to 59 years in prison in 1998 for organising student protests and demonstrations. He was killed in Mandalay prison in 2006. *Ma Win Maw Oo* is the image of a thirteen-year-old girl, Ma Win Maw, who was shot dead by the Burmese military in a protest. The image made headlines all over the world, but was soon forgotten. Only a copied, pixelated version of the image remains now. *The Bodhi Tree* is about Sitt Nyein Aye, a painter, who escaped to Delhi after 1988. He set up a studio in a small room under the Bodhi tree. *Somewhere in May* talks about two simultaneous events on 17 May 2004. While Norway celebrated their

National Constitutional Day, the military dictatorship in Burma started a National Convention of Democracy. A small radio station in Oslo, Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) presented a long report on radio describing how the convention is a pretence by the military junta.

The second part consists of seven channel video where the Burmese refugees in Fort Wayne, Indiana, USA are shown. The first refugees arrived in USA from Burma in 1990. The film shows the activities of the close knit Burmese community, their longing for home, recollections, memories and remembrance.

The third part has six channel video where archives of Burmese resistance, as documented on the internet, are shown. Along with this various amateur and professional footage of protests, speeches and rallies, both big and small, are shown. Adding to this mix are videos that present the former General Ne Win with his pack of military junta.

The nineteen screens are arranged in three groups according to the parts described above. The videos do not fill the room with large size projections; instead small screens that look like fragile paper are used. Three large grids arrange the three parts. The screens are back projected leaving the audience to face the screen directly. The installation also consists of three large books that provide further references to the Burmese democratic movement.

THE LIGHTNING TESTIMONIES (2007)

The Lightning Testimonies is an eight-part installation on the rape and sexual violence in India. The installation features several incidents of sexual violence and rape at various points in the history of India starting from 1947. The rape of Hindu and Muslim women from both sides during partition of India in 1947, rape of women from the north-east India by the Indian army men, Pakistan army men raping women in Bangladesh during the 1971 war, rape and violence against Dalit

women in Maharashtra and the Gujarat riots in 2002, are some of the instances described in the videos.

The videos are presented on large screens. It does not show the explicit violence and abuse, but the people who remember the women and the incidents. Stories of brutality are intricately woven with the otherwise normalcy of the mundane. Nature, people, places, buildings, objects, faces, gestures and movements are

the meditative images that fill up the screens. The texts present the poignant stories of rape, violence, told with courage and fondness. There is no anger invited, no provocation, simply stories told as they happened, almost like a reportage. "An alert audience does not need to be drawn into explicit detail" (Shrivastava 2012, 347). Instead the audience is drawn into the stories through images of the place where they happened. The audience has to imagine the gruesome violence on the body and the mind by looking at inanimate objects like the buildings, trees, memorials, that bear witness to it. Shrivastava calls them "carriers

of forbidden secret" (Shrivastava 2012, 348). These objects carry the mark of the incident(s), just like the audience members after viewing will carry the incident.

The aesthetics of the video carry with it the politics of the individual. The struggle and systematic destruction of an individual's identity, is evident in the stories of the people. The screens may tell different stories of different times, but they all come together in the 21st minute to show one image, giving the viewer another visual experience in a multi-channel installation.

AUDIENCE INTERACTION: UNRAVELLING THE INSTALLATION

The installation set-up in both the works is easy for the audience members to grasp. *The Lightning Testimonies* uses varied aesthetic techniques in the eight channels. The visual forms of archival images, documentary footage, graphics and drawings exist along with varied auditory forms, creating a visually rich immersive experience. "Flowing within and between eight projections is an attempt to understand the archiving of pain and memory accompanied by an attempted articulation of the unsaid" (Jhaveri 2010).

The Torn First Pages uses different techniques not only within the three parts, but on individual screens as well. The third part of the installation juxtaposes the images of General Ne Win and the military junta with pages from the state's political, economic and social slogans. Kanwar creates a caricature of the military junta (Poddar 2012, 161). Kanwar uses poems by Tin Moe in the second part of the installations, that share the nostalgia and grief of the Burmese refugees. The image of Ma Win Maw explodes with inflated image pixels.

Kanwar's emphasis on the use of text requires one to be fixed to the video; one has to watch carefully, fully immersed, and read the text in order to know all the stories. In the *The Lightning Testimonies* the presence of 'body' is overwhelming which directly affects the physical body of the viewer. The viewer draws inwards and opens new relationship to images, sound, silences

and the viewing space. Kanwar's use of silence and pauses in both the installations are an important part of the videos. The pauses are like gaps that give the audience the time to grasp and ponder over what is said. The silences are pertinent in activating the presence of the viewers who are implicated in the installation. The audience negotiates their own position in the context of the videos; their own engagement with the state apparatus, political associations or the lack of it. The works not only "create objects that produce a context" but is also able to "provoke a context" (Poddar 2012, 161).

One of the techniques of a video installation is the time narrative that is created and disrupted at the same time. While the installation presents different times in one space, it can also present one time in multiple voices. *The Torn First Pages* carry within it both multiple times of an event and multiple events that make up a grand event in the history. Kanwar "utilise(s) subtle notion of time: historical, archival, exiled, recent past, real, imminent, recurring, accelerated, slowed down, and so on. The resulting panoply of sensory simulation attests to the cyclical nature of history with its endless echoes and ghosting as well the simultaneity in which we experience time" (Poddar 2012, 160). *The Lightning Testimonies* brings together multiple times in one narrative. The time that has passed was remembered while making the video and is then relayed in the present of the audience. This

folding of time in the presence of the viewer can be multiplied in the numerous stories onscreen. According to Kanwar, "In the context of installations it is possibly more interesting to examine the potential of image and sound to create what I would call 'a heightened perception of the simultaneous passage of multiple time'" (Jhaveri 2010).

Kanwar interrogates the term 'evidence' in his works. The definition of evidence according to law, the crime that continues to happen despite evidence, the invisibility of the evidence and the validity of poetry as evidence to provide a valuable dimension on the crime (Zyman 2013). If the work positions itself as iambic evidence, then that makes the viewer a witness. This opens up a new relationship between images and the audience. The audience is no longer just viewing, feeling, being affected, but is embedded in the socio-political context of the installation in the time that has carried on since the creation of the video till the present time of the viewer. An act of viewing a video installation is suddenly loaded with socio-political enquiry.

The video installation apparatus maybe different to the cinematic apparatus in the physical sense, but when viewing, the audience is interpellated as a subject similar to the cinematic apparatus. Due to the specific nature of Kanwar's installation (political, yet not overtly so; at the same time personal, yet not dramatic), the interpellation of the audience occurs at three levels.

a. Subjects in the video: Understanding loss is an important part in the works by Kanwar. Questions

of who loses and what, who mourns and till when, engages the audience in a constant dialogue with the videos.

- b. Recognising themselves as subjects of the state and other powers: The state and its agencies control the people through various forms of apparatuses. By situating the audience in one such apparatus, reflecting on the works of Kanwar, makes them aware of their own relations of production that situate them in a deep socio-political power nexus.
- c. Presentation of the video installation in the gallery/museum: The artwork is laid out in a way that allows the audience to engage at any point with the videos. The apparatus of the video installation has the museum or gallery as one of the 'functionaries' of the apparatus. The commodification of art object and corporatisation of the gallery/museum set-up are made aware to the audience. The installation becomes self-referential. The "visitor becomes aware of the museum itself as a mega-installation... full of spatial positions charged with power, full of fetish-objects transposable anywhere, a site that oils the fluid transpositions of concepts and commodity-objects between ontological realms" (Morse 1990 166).

The essay in the beginning laid down three stages of the audience interacting with the video installation. The third stage, that of the participant who engages with the installation even after being physically removed from it, is achieved when he or she has identified all three.

CONCLUSION

Post-medium can be viewed as collapsing of media. Rosalind Krauss has written extensively about the post-medium condition. In order to define post-media, she studies the reinvention of the medium in its obsolescence (Krauss 1999, 304-305). In another essay she invokes Fredric Jameson to identify the postmodern aesthetic experience that "leeches out into the social field" in general. She remarks that installation and intermedia work is "complicit with a globalisation of image in the

service of capital"; a few artists who have rejected this and have successfully played with the traditional media, are in the process re-inventing them (Krauss 2000, 56).

Lev Manovich proclaimed that we ought to get rid of the concept of medium in post-digital age, as everything collapses into the digital; instead think of other metaphors and definitions to define physical properties of what we call material (Manovich 2010).

The narrative techniques and unique formats of Kanwar's installations raise questions of multiple subjectivities and experiences of the audience that might be helpful

in thinking through the term post-medium. A possible redefinition of post-medium lies in the engagement with the object and not in its making.

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