



Rummaging for Pasts

Ashish Avikunthak

Chatterjee & Lal
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A Conversation Between Mortimer Chatterjee and Ashish Avikunthak

MC: For people who know you as a filmmaker, it may come as some surprise to see the variety of mediums being shown in the exhibition. In actual fact, you have always considered yourself a multidisciplinary artist and so it would be interesting to know more about when and how you developed an interest in working beyond the boundaries of film alone. Could you address the differences and similarities of filmmaking against creating work in other mediums?

AA: I imagine myself as a person who thinks through practice. This thinking involves not just the works that I produce as a filmmaker or photographer but also those that I produce as a scholar and now as a painter and sculptor. For me, a filmic, artistic, or scholarly intervention cannot be frivolous or insouciant. It should emerge from a robust theory of practice—a deeply committed, concentrated, and rigorous process of thinking and craftsmanship, along with firm dexterity with the medium. The choice of medium cannot be merely made because it is vogue or in fashion—something that is not uncommon in the art world. For me, the medium is the thought, to paraphrase the communication theorist Marshall McLuhan, who famously noted, “The medium is the message”—foregrounding that the form or the method through which the message is mediated is perhaps as important as the message itself. I have been making films and taking photographs for nearly three decades now, constantly engaging with my craft and the possibilities it can engender.

I have been doing pen and ink work for even longer, although I do not think that I had done any interesting or important work that deserved to have a public life. Even this present work remained in the cupboard for nearly a decade before I decided to show it to you and Tara. The Khadi sculptural work is connected to my lifetime’s engagement with the materiality of hand-spun yarn and its political and philosophical valence in the world that we live in.

MC: Can you provide some background to the making of ‘Performing Death’ and ‘Rummaging for Pasts’ and why you wanted to show them together in this exhibition? The videos present the dead and the undead on something of a collision course. This seems to be directly related to your deep interest in the anthropology of archaeology.

AA: These film works were made when I was a doctoral student at Stanford University in the early 2000s. They are the only two films in my filmography that directly emerge from my academic interests. They are products of my engagement with archaeological theory—an area that concerns my doctoral thesis and eventually led to the making of my book, “Bureaucratic Archaeology: State, Science, and Past in Postcolonial India” (2021). Before reaching the US, all my work was made on 16mm. At Stanford, I got access to digital video, and both of these works were conceived and made there—the only works of video aesthetics in my filmography. I was never interested in documentary films or visual anthropology because both forms of cinema feign objectivity and impartiality. Often times, they also become instruments of propaganda, however progressive and radical the film’s subjectivity is. I wanted to explore new ways of thinking.



Still from *Rummaging for Pasts*, 2001 Digital video, color, 27 minutes

The concept of essay film was just emerging within film theory as a legitimate means of representation. Dziga Vertov's "Man with a Movie Camera" (1929), Chris Marker's "Sans Soleil" (1983), and Jean-Luc Godard's "Histoire(s) du Cinema" (1988), along with works by the German filmmaker Harun Farocki and others in the early 2000s, were being re-theorized, re-framed, and re-categorized as essay films rather than documentaries. An essay film unambiguously foregrounds a filmmaker's subjectivity and is motivated by a provisional, tentative, and even speculative exploratory sensibility that delicately hovers between interrogation and contemplation.

Both of these films are short essay films through which I am thinking through ideological, political, and cultural disjuncture rather than a collision. They both juxtapose two distinct categories of experiences into one representational form. Juxtaposition is the opposite of deconstruction—by bringing together contrasting categories, I am producing divergent meanings, which might be insightful in producing a nuanced narrative of a complex phenomenon.

MC: Of all of your film work, 'Rummaging for Pasts' most directly addresses your academic work as an anthropologist, in particular within the discipline of archaeology. Why did you decide to bring these two worlds together and how do you look back on the film 20 years plus later.

AA: "Rummaging for Pasts: Excavating Sicily, Digging Bombay" is an experimental juxtaposition of two cinematic documents—the video diary of an international archaeological excavation and a collection of found footage. The video diary is that of a transnational archaeological excavation that I attended as a doctoral student at the site of Monte Polizzo in northwestern Sicily in the summer of 2000. The found footage archive consists of abandoned 8mm and super8 home movies made in India that I have been collecting from Chor Bazaar in Bombay since the mid-1990s.

The archaeologists, digging on the site of Monte Polizzo in Sicily, are in pursuit of an ephemeral past, its people, and its meaning. The found footage, excavated from a roadside junkyard in a Bombay flea market, embodies forgotten images of a collective memory.



Still from *Performing Death*, 2002 Digital video, color, 16 minutes

Two archaeologies—one an academic endeavor, the other a collector’s fetish; one investigating the pre-classical world of the Mediterranean in search of the indigenous Sicilian, the other a gaze into the private moments, ceremonies, and rituals of urban middle-class India of the 1970s.

This essay film is primarily a critical examination of archaeological excavation as a transnational practice. Here, my central concern is to explore the political ramifications of archaeologists belonging to different nationalities coming together to dig a Greek site in Italy. Although the excavations by excavators are framed within the common genealogy of the European past, as an outsider (non-European), I was surprised by the unmistakable colonial overtones of this transnational project. The only way I could critically examine this transnational archaeology was by placing myself in the video, as I was also a transnational subject. Therefore, the usage of discarded Indian home movies works as a self-reflexive interpolation—primarily an archaeologist interested in somebody else’s past. This juxtaposition was driven by an often repeated cliché in archaeological discourse—“past is another country.” The film is an attempt to engage with the ambiguity inherent in the rumination over these pasts, once abandoned but now reconstructed, assuming fresh connotations and meaning. The multiple objectives of the archaeological endeavor coalesce with the palpable visuals of a brief nostalgia to emerge as a continuous narrative.

MC: ‘Performing Death’ is rooted in the sights and sounds of Calcutta, a city that features in so much of your output. The film shuttles between two very different sites of ritual: the somewhat forgotten Christian burial grounds of the city and worship in a living Hindu temple dedicated to Durga. It is startling that the city can make space for two such different traditions and it would be interesting to know why you bring them together in this film.

AA: “Performing Death” was also made when I was a student at Stanford to be shown at the 2002 Annual Conference of the European Association of Archaeology held in Thessaloniki. I was then working on an article on the cemetery that you see in the film. This is the South Park Street Cemetery in Calcutta, which is the earliest non-denominational garden cemetery

in the world, with its earliest burial dated to 1767. It predates well-known garden cemeteries in London like the Highgate Cemetery or the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris by many decades. This cemetery is now located in the heart of postcolonial Calcutta, which I have been visiting since I was in high school. This cemetery has also featured in two of my films—the last chapter of “Et Cetera” called “Renunciation” (1997) and in my first feature film, “Nirakar Chhaya” (2007).

In the article called “Ambivalent Heritage: Between Affect and Ideology in a Colonial Cemetery,” I examine the significance of colonial cemeteries and explain why they are sites of neglect and decay in contemporary India. I argue that the discard and abandonment of colonial cemeteries in the postcolonial landscape stems from the ambivalent meaning that such a heritage site generates in the postcolony.

The film creates a dialogue between a site of mourning and trauma in colonial Calcutta and the living exuberance and celebration of a Hindu ritual. By juxtaposing the images of a colonial cemetery shot in a stylized way (using slow shutter) with ritual dance at a contemporary community religious event in Calcutta (Durga puja), the film is opening up a tenuous conversation between these two dramatic divergent cultural ethos—one that’s part of a dead past and the other that’s part of the chaotic present—existing in concurrence.

MC: The train ticket pen and ink works are almost hallucinatory in their liberal use of colour and their spiral forms. They seem to reference both Op-Art and Neo-Tantric art movements. Do you accept these connections and were they conscious in your mind at the time of execution. What were the circumstances that you led you to undertake this series?

AA: No, I was not thinking of any form of artistic intervention when I started this work. This work is neither referencing nor inspired by the Op-Art or Neo-Tantric art movements. There are two material reasons why I undertook this work. I had been doing pen and ink drawings for quite some time, mostly on small pads and in sketchbooks. But these were sporadic, mostly because I did not like the texture of the paper in the sketchbooks. But there were two discoveries that fueled this body of work of nearly three hundred pen and ink drawings done between 2010 and 2013. First was the discovery of the brush-pen, which facilitated the flow of my wrist as I maneuvered ink on the paper. The second was the discovery of the paper itself. These drawings have been done on New Jersey Transit tickets. I had bought one once when I was taking the train to Princeton from Penn Station in New York. When I got home, I drew on it and was captivated by the texture and velvetiness of the paper, especially the way my brush pen swiftly glided on the paper. I was so taken by the texture of the paper that I started collecting the tickets.

Obviously, I could not have taken so many trips on NJ Transit, so I started collecting them from garbage cans lining the Penn station in New York. Sometimes, I would just go to New York from New Haven to loiter around Penn Station during office hours in the mornings and evenings just to pull tickets from the garbage cans. I must have collected nearly five hundred tickets over the course of two years and finally made three hundred drawings.



(L) *Untitled 20*, (R) *Untitled 65*
2014 - 2015, Mixed media on NJ Transit ticket
4 x 3.5 in. | 10 x 8.8 cm



Khadi Bundle #8, 2022
Seven hand-spun bundles of Khadi yarn tied with Rubber Bands
Each bundle measures 500 meters
8 x 4 x 2 1/4 in., 20.3 x 10.2 x 5.7 cm

MC: The sculptural works are quiet, meditative objects. As with your work in film, you seem to allow your interest in other fields to inform your wider artistic practice. Here, your active promotion of hand spun yarn has been a feature of your life for many years. How and why has the process ended up as objects of display?

AA: In 1992, two weeks after the demolition of the Babri Masjid and following the killing of hundreds in the city of Bombay, I participated in a peace vigil at Flora Fountain in the middle of a city that was afraid and traumatized. A group of frail but courageous peace activists staged a silent protest against the violence that had engulfed the cosmopolitan metropolis. In the small assembly was the veteran Gandhian Thakurdas Bang, sitting calmly in one corner, spinning khadi on a petti-charkha—a collapsible, horizontal spinning wheel niftily enclosed in a rectangular wooden box. I was astounded by the presence of the frail man sitting quietly at the edge of the street, spinning khadi silently as the city was burning. The symbolic valence of the act pierced my consciousness. I was in tears. I sat next to the elderly gentleman and stared as he dexterously spun yarn. I was intrigued by the grace with which a fine thread emerged from a ball of cotton as the 75-year-old man rotated the mechanical contraception nonchalantly, without any effort. I was deeply moved. He noticed my awe and invited me to spin on his charkha. I floundered, and he patiently taught me. I was a mess at spinning.

That moment led me to Mani Bhavan—the house where Gandhi stayed during his sojourn in Bombay—where I learned to spin for a few weeks. Once I mastered the process, I would spin an hour a day or more, but over the years, I have become sporadic. The early batches of khadi yarn that I spun were sent to weavers in Gopuri Ashram in Wardha, where veteran weavers would take yarn made by amateurs like me and weave it into cloth. But once I left for the US, the yarn I spun was just kept in storage. It was during the COVID pandemic, when I was stuck in the house, that I started spinning frantically and amassed a large body of yarn. It was during those silent and painful days that I decided that rather than send the yarn to the weavers I would create sculptural works.

MC: In the drawings and the sculptures there is something of the obsessive compulsive that reveals itself in the process of repetition that is common to both. Could you speak to this linking thread in your practice?

AA: More than obsessive-compulsive, both works emerge from a ritualistic ontological practice. In the case of the pen and ink works, it involves a short stroke of the brush pen pivoted on the muscle memory of the wrist. Spinning khadi involves muscle memory and the measured coordination of eye, hand, and shoulder movements at the right speed and consistency to produce yarn. Both works involve the long and practiced cultivation of a muscle memory that generates ritual action, which produces the materiality of these works.

About the artist:

Ashish Avikunthak has been making films in India since the mid nineties. His films have been shown worldwide in film festivals, galleries and museums. His films have been shown at Tate Modern, London, Centre George Pompidou, Paris, Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, along with London, Locarno, Rotterdam, and Berlin film festivals, among other locations. He has a PhD in Cultural Anthropology from Stanford University and is now an Asst. Professor of Film and Media at the University of Rhode Island.



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