NEW ARTICLE: Geographical Architectures in Contemporary Indian Video Art
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The sound of the train suddenly takes me back to the past. I am sixteen years old traveling with two friends from Havana to Batabano, imagining that we are in a foreign land. Across my seat, facing the window, a Hindu woman sketches the distant landscape with her left fingers. The dark surrounds me at a museum in Merida, Mexico, part of the territory baptized as "Las Indias" by the Spanish colonizers who crossed the Atlantic in 1492 with what Ella Shohat has defined as "a ready-made us versus them ideology aimed at the region of India who was colonized by Vasco de Gama in 1498." Ironically, the indigenous people here are still called "Indios" to re-inscribe the colonial hierarchies and the cast system. Glimpses of a conversation I had with Shuddha Sengupta at Alchemy regarding the power of documentary haunts my viewing. I am the distant observer, the viewer who has been saturated with stereotypical images of India and now restructures the way to interpret this contemporary audiovisual discourse.

The window opens and closes. The sound of the train fades into the sound of running water and the title "Pure" remains static for a few seconds. In Sudda Gupta's piece, a naked man takes a shower in a very small bathroom. The performative nature of the act recalls the architecture of the process: a daily act becomes a performance and the body, the center of representation. The sensation of the long take hooks me on the present. Clean vs. Dirt unfolds as a dichotomy until I realized that a mechanism of regression takes places in the lower side of the frame. Technology is brought to question the process of mixing temporal

spaces, carving the historicity of the narrative. The apparent progression of time is now contested by covering the body with dirt. Until then, the interior has marked the geography of the body as a site of internal debate. Suddenly, the man walks toward the camera. The space shifts to a contiguous location as he enters an elevator. The gesture, in an ongoing temporal remark, denotes the signification of the public space in relation to the body and the dichotomy of cleaning/cleansing vs. dirt. As the elevator closes, the woman at the window looks at me.

The train crosses a tunnel. A fragmented light projects a large mirror where a "Man with a Cockerel" appears in front of me. In the lower part of the image, the reflexivity of the surface breaks the apparent realism of the upper part. Ranbir Kaleka, also dealing with temporal relations, uses technology to imply an imaginary Hindu landscape where the reflex moves into disappearance just to bring back to the viewing the fragmentation of the visual representation.

I have no choice than to question the aesthetics of representation. Perhaps, I was expecting the stereotypical

images of India I knew. The woman at the train's window smiles at me. A political dimension enters my reading as the traditional stereotypes are broken by these images. The words of Stuart Hall fade in the aural level: "Representation is possible only because enunciation is always produced within the codes which have history, a position with the discursive formation of a particular space and time." The surfaces of these audiovisual discourses are just the entrances to a textual narrative where multiple historical, social, cultural and spiritual practices converge to create new and provocative representations.

Kiran Subbiah's "When your Mouth is Full" frames a reflexive location cleverly divided to present the same character performing antagonist positions toward eating food. Ironically, the video resonates right at home, in the colonial discourse that places "eating indigenous food" at the margin just because it is eaten with the hands. Subbiah points out how the colonial experience has displaced the traditions in the name of the "civilized society" and how we have co-opted the imposition of "civilized manners" in order to find acceptance within the colonial system.

The place of resistance contributes to the development of our identity. In Tejal Shah's "Love my India," racially motivated conflicts and ethnic genocides transgress the border of India as we connect the struggle of the Muslim minority with similar conflict in different parts of the world. For us, living in The Americas, thinking that the colonial paradigm is only Europe vs. US, the video sends a message: "we must search within our national borders to avoid the use of religious fundamentalism to place our own people against each other." The value of the piece resides on Shah's discourse asking for democracy at a moment when Hindu filmmakers are boycotting the Mumbai International Film festival because of a "decision by the organizers of the festival, Films Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to introduce a clause which requires Indian documentaries entered for the festival to be censored."

Nalini Malini's "Unity in Diversity" is a multi-layered work offering a revaluation of the different historical, cultural and social perspectives. From the beginning, the digital superimpositions restructure a series of paintings in relation to female body parts, positioning my viewing in a critical territory. The sensation of being overwhelmed by the amount of information makes me think of the constant bombardment of news. Suddenly, the image of a surgery offers the opportunity of detaching from the avalanches of images, but the sounds of the shooting and the music direct me to a discourse of oppression. We are confronted with a reality of the "global" world: racial conflicts. I think of the thousands of Arab Americans who are now in jail only because of their ethnic origin and the so-called "war on terrorism," and Malini's work crosses her national border to enunciate the irregularities of our historical times.

The mythological condition of death transgresses the boundaries of cultures to become a performative gesture that hunts the audiovisual images. Subba Ghosh's "Remains of a Breath" creates a temporal relation of four long shots separated by fades, each creating a distinctive sign of death. Perhaps, coming from a culture where the territory of the dreams is the location of death and the ancestors, the mis en scene framed by the bed and the white pillow motivates my reactions. In each shot, the body is presented in a different position to accentuate the possibility of connecting the previous long take with the present, forcing a narrative continuity whose figure simulates an ellipsis that take, in each turn, a different signification. With each different position, we see the body covered by different materials: newspaper, dust, ash and flowers. The gesture of covering is what creates the ellipsis; each position of the body and the materials create the

difference. It is at the space of difference where the piece mirrors the sensorial response of the audience.

The train, finally, has arrived to a snowy landscape. The cold winter wind blows over my face to remind me of old days of walking at the Iowa River's shore. The woman walks in front of me, but I hear voices: other women. Our traveling has entered a mirror as we cross the window. The actress cleaning the glass has opened a temporal location. As she looks back to the camera, I am caught in a triptych axis where a woman looking at the painting of a female dissolve into a woman performing the painter who, at the same time, speaks to the woman behind the camera. A ritualistic performance of social relevance takes place. Pooja Kaul has brought back to the present a fragmented portrait of Amrita Sher-Gil, a woman painter who lived around the 1930's. Kaul, honoring the mixed ancestry of the painter--she was half Indian, half Hungarian--has created a mixed narrative where performance styles, documentary and fiction are woven to create the ritual. The snowy landscape, filmed with a wide-angle lens, represents the artistic inquiries of a painter. When I see her portrait, I think of Frida Kalo and Ana Mendieta: women artists who are constantly rediscovered by other women in order to denounce a patriarchal discourse that places their work at the margin of the "art world."

The old photographs in Pooja's "Winter Trail" are employed, masterly, as a linguistic referent to recreate the fiction and the performance. Sometimes, the position of the actress resembles that of the painter or the mis en scene is constructed around the one presented at the photo. Her ability to cross the spaces and the times places the viewer in a trance. The multidimensionality of the work reflects back to our hybrid self, to the history of those artists who have lived at the margin of their own culture because they are only half, they live in exile or simply because they are women creating art in a male dominated world.

I want to continue my traveling. The disparities of globalization intent to reaffirm the old stereotypes we have in "Las Americas" of India. Nevertheless, the walls of the museum have confined us to a reflexive viewing where the politics of performance, death, the urban space, the sacred space and technology intercept to create audiovisual discourses that resembles the present reality of India. The sound of the train still here, the screen is black and the lights are up. I look around and, in the audience, I see joy after viewing these works.

Merida, Mexico-Los Angeles, California, December 2003.

Images
1. Title: Winter Trail; Media: Digital Video; Artist: Pooja Kaul
2. Title: While the mouth is full; Media: Digital Video; Artist: Kiran Subbiah
3. Title: Man with cockerel; Media: Digital Video; Author: Ranbir Kaleka
4. Title: While the mouth is full; Media: Digital Video; Artist: Kiran Subbiah
5. Title: Winter Trail; Media: Digital Video; Artist: Pooja Kaul
6. Title: Winter Trail; Media: Digital Video; Artist: Pooja Kaul

Endnotes
1. Shohat, Ella. Staging the Quincentenary: The Middle East and the Americas. Third Text. No 21, winter 1992-93.
2. A conversation at Alchemy Master Class organized by the Australian Network of Art and Technology at the Powerhouse Art Center, Brisbane, Australia in May-June 2000.
3. Hall, Stuart. New Ethnicities. Black Film British Cinema, ICA documents 7, London.
4. Pankaj Butalia and Saba Dewan, CAMPAIGN AGAINST CENSORSHIP AT MIFF, published at reader-list@sarai.net on September 15, 2003
5. This selection of videos was made by Pooja Sood and was presented as part of InteractivA '03 at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Yucatan, Mexico in July 2003.