

Alternate Geographies

Sumesh Sharma in conversation with Amanprit Sandhu



Detail of installation, *Kinematic Modern*, 2014, Art Dubai Projects 2014.
Image courtesy of Clark House Initiative.

This interview between curator Amanprit Sandhu and Sumesh Sharma from the Mumbai-based collective Clark House Initiative considers the cultural history of Indian cinema, and the use of DIY filmmaking techniques in reimagining the 'Global South'. Discussing previous projects, and Ibraaz's online commission [*Incidents of the Paradoxical Gaze*](#), this interview is accompanied by a 008 project by commissioned artist and Clark House member Yogesh Barve.

Amanprit Sandhu: I want to begin by discussing The Kinematic Modern project (2014) presented at Art Dubai earlier last year. The project highlights some of Clark Houses' key concerns; the re-reading of histories, representation and visibility. Can you describe how this project developed?

Sumesh Sharma: *The Kinematic Modern* at Art Dubai 2014 was a project that sought two parallels. Cinema provided a respite to many during the decades of socialism that India was aptly put through post-independence. At Clark House we aren't critical of this period, rather we celebrate the possibilities of alternate internationalisms that arose through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). This period also produced chronic employment shortages, and an economy that staggered, but a lot was done to create a strong structural support in terms of heavy industries, the banking system, and the growth of indigenous entrepreneurs. This took place despite all of the bureaucracy and political nepotism. India celebrated socialist leaders such as Indonesia's first president Sukarno, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, Romania's Nicolae Ceaușescu, Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh and Marshal Tito among others. Leo Tolstoy had in many ways formed our ideas of patriotism, and Gandhi often returns to him as an inspiration. Thus, to see cinema as an agent of change was natural. Mehboob Khan was one such producer-director who took it upon himself during this period to direct movies that heralded the national agenda or propaganda with films such as *Mother India* (1957). The leap towards modernity was essential – the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, wanted to move away from the caste system, Nasser wanted to turn Egypt into a modern Arab society. Nehru and Nasser focused on dams, and, often on singers such as Oum Kalthoum. Their passion to reject the colonial yoke was genuine, as were their mistakes as leaders.

Thus, *Kinematic Modern* traces those early attempts at cinema, a period where the painter M.F. Husain, in a kind of conversation with Picasso, created *Through the Eyes of a Painter* (1967), or Tyeb Mehta's 1970 film *Koodal* referencing *Le Sang des bêtes* (Blood of the Beasts, 1949) in order to critique the dehumanization that partition had caused within the subcontinent, a critique that is still relevant now. These films were made under the direction of Jean Bhowmagary, a Franco-Indian comedian, and documentary filmmaker invited by then newly elected prime minister Indira Gandhi to take up the role of Chief Producer at the National Films Division. He agreed and during this time was busy lending the camera to his artist friends.

Yogesh Barve was in Dubai as part of this project and we were discussing the cultural history of cinema and looking at its association with the Indian diaspora in the Gulf region. Yogesh and fellow artist Amol Patil re-animated *Dialogue between Nations* (1959) a collaboration between Jean Bhowmagary and the Czech cartoonist Jiri Trnka. The work was looped with movies directed by the modernists and shown on a Sony Trinitron television. In the years of trade control during our socialist past, people often bought smuggled televisions from smugglers who procured them from workers returning from the Middle East.

Alongside this film, Justin Ponmany a Malayali artist who grew up in Bombay, designed a selection of objects that represented Malayali identity. He displayed them on a shelving system inspired by the Dutch designer Poul Cadovius called the Royal System, which was often seen in homes of nuclear families and held objects of apparent modernity and travel.

AS: These early experiments in cinema were eventually superseded by the Bollywood film industry. You mention the cultural history of cinema and its association with the diaspora, can you talk about this a little more?

SS: At Clark House we are very critical of Bollywood and its abilities in creating stereotypes of communities that are disadvantaged, and to which many members of Clark House Initiative belong to, and in turn their objectification of women. Arguably Bollywood has also aided the diaspora to create unnatural existences in foreign lands and a refusal to participate in local culture. A case in point is the UAE. The Indian

diaspora forms an absolute majority, but their participation in an event like Art Dubai is negligible, a presence limited to participating galleries, artists, or the occasional collector. We watched many videos on YouTube to garner information on this phenomenon, and realized that each sub-community of the Indian diaspora were absorbed in their own cultural activities which they had transported from their region. A significant majority of this diaspora is from Kerala in southern India. I grew up in Cochin, Kerala and I drag Clark House there anytime I get a chance. In Cochin we know the superstars of Malayali cinema live in Dubai, they live almost unknown lives in the Emirates. The richest families in the UAE are from Kerala but even Keralan cuisine is underrepresented.



Video still, *Daily Routine*, 2012 – ongoing, *Incidents of the Paradoxical Gaze*.
Image courtesy of Yogesh Bharve & Clark House Initiative.

AS: *Incidents of the Paradoxical Gaze* is the online project produced by Clark House Initiative and artist Yogesh Barve for the Ibraaz 008 platform. Alternate histories, travel and chance encounters were the impetus behind some of these videos. How important was this process to the project?

SS: Yogesh and I had been recording short videos over the past year. Most of these films were single shot films we recorded whilst travelling. One night over drinks in Dubai we watched Oum Kalthoum singing. Yogesh had never heard of her and thought the formation of the orchestra was avant-garde. It was at that point that we began

discussing the idea of the *Moyen-Orient*.

On a separate occasion over dinner in San Giovanni Valdarno, Italy, Amos Gitai the Israeli film maker known for his pro-Palestine stance, showed me and artist Prabhakar Pachpute *Ana Arabia* (2013), a film he had written and directed about an Israeli-Arab marriage in Jaffa, Israel. The conversation was the inspiration behind the video *Italy* (2013) which we shot between Florence and San Giovanni Valdarno. The Muslim girl in the video is travelling to Arezzo, a city which is home to many Moroccan immigrants, and her friend is drawing her. The act of drawing is not encouraged under Sharia, and the act of drawing another human being is discouraged in some understandings of Islam. But she enjoys the attention and I talk to her friend who despite studying in Florence, is not sure what he will do with his drawing skills. He is not connected to the network of galleries, museums or curatorial conferences. The girl in her head scarf does not delve into religious theology, nor does the encounter become an art happening. The video is essentially a critique of the absolutisms of politics, society, and an increasing xenophobia against Islam.

At the beginning of the year the entire Clark House family travelled to a village called Revdanda in Maharashtra for a residency. Across the sea is an archipelago where there is a village called Korlai. The residency took place just before the Indian general elections and the Maharashtrian identity had been fed into their minds based on a resurgence in regional parochialism. Revdanda houses the remnants of a Jewish community called the Bene Israel who had arrived on the coast of the Konkan after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. The women all wore nine yard saris' and spoke almost only in Marathi. The young talked of the impending 'aliya' (migration) to Israel. We then visited Korlai. Unlike Bombay, Korlai remained a Portuguese speaking village, hidden away and ruled by Kanhoji Angre, chief of the Maratha navy in the eighteenth century. The lady in the video *Korlai* (2014) is the only surviving Portuguese speaker in the village and sings for us. This composition was made possible by the sea – our histories extended to Zanzibar, Djibouti, Yemen, Mozambique and the Emirates. We wanted to deny the idea of pure ethnicity or culture and our vacation in these villages helped communicate something that could only be a lived experience.

AS: *Wan Chai* (2014) and *Copyright* © 2014 (2014) touches upon the inherent complexities arising from the legacy of colonialism, and state censorship respectively.

Social media and mobile devices have been key in bringing these issues back into the public consciousness recently. What was the significance of including these two videos?

SS: *Wan Chai* sees an African tourist being rounded up by drunken British expats as the woman he is with defends him. Both sides are drunk, but the police only detain the black man. This type of discrimination is unfortunately a regular and common occurrence, but the commentary on the video is in Nepalese where the man recording is cheering on the white men saying that the cowardly Chinese police could not handle the black man and the white man had to step in. This video was shared widely on Facebook and then downloaded by us. In Hong Kong race relations are complex. Hong Kong is celebrated as this island of liberalism, and people find refuge in the last outpost of colonialism. The freedoms enjoyed are often geared for a continuous form of colonization that aides financial markets. Allowing racist expats to gather and live nostalgic dreams.

In *Copyright © 2014* the DVD store is hidden away in a neo-gothic building and is the only space for real freedoms. Censorship has led to many old art deco cinemas in Bombay shutting shop thus limiting our access to good cinema. In a nation where our prime minister now gives guidelines to cinema and directs its focus, we face a limitation of expression which will only make future generations ignorant to the large-scale controlled media propaganda. So this small store at the end of the corridor of this neo-gothic building is where liberty exists. Cinema piracy is the greatest form of subversion of a system that acts against people.

AS: I also see an ambivalence towards parts of the art world within Clark Houses' projects, in terms of how the art world presents these complexities and conversations.

SS: Indian and West Asian art is always grouped under Islamic Art and Middle East or MENSA, etc. by auction catalogues. These auction catalogues contribute to the curatorial programmes of museums. Many people included in the Bonhams catalogue that we scanned for the video *Middle East and Indian Artist (2014)* were in fact artists who aligned themselves with alternate geographies. For example Rabindranath Tagore, Jamini Roy, Nandalal Bose and others were looking at Other Asia's with

Okakura Kakuzō. And our friends in Egypt, and the likes of M.F. Hussain and Jehangir Sabavala were aligned formally and aesthetically with Picasso or Braque. However, the market gathers these artists together to make strange bedfellows.

Conversations and an idea of a 'Global South' across Africa, the Middle East and India are brought together most regularly through Bollywood. We are a divided region, and this is reflected in the reluctance for this dialogue to emerge. Yogesh's works take the form of amateur ad hoc videos, the type that are prevalent in these regions. In Syria it is of military ambushes, in Egypt of protests and in India of amateur porn. We are people expressing ourselves only to be censored. This censorship is not just restricted to politics; it extends to the formats of art and the institutional framework that make us inaccessible. We remain in the vitrine of a Tate Collection, or an acquisitions programme, or an art fair which often directs us to the oil wealth a region has.



Video still *Korlai*, 2014, *Incidents of the Paradoxical Gaze*.
Image courtesy of Yogesh Bharve & Clark House Initiative.

AS: How do you see Clark House moving these conversations and discussions forward?

SS: We have been working with Tunisian photographer Zied Ben Romdhane since 2012. *Proletariat Aesthetics* is a project that takes the form of curatorial research into the politicized aesthetics prevalent in much contemporary art today. Zied Ben Romdhane often deals with the history of a left movement sabotaged and then ignored in Tunisia during the period of Ben Ali's dictatorship only to resurface within student movements during the mass protests of the 'Arab Spring', and its present legitimacy as an opposition to the newly elected right wing government in Tunis. *Zones D'Attentes* (Waiting Zones) is Clark House's second in a series of projects that stand in solidarity with the Maghreb aimed at developing a continuing dialogue between the two distant regions of North Africa and South Asia.

Clark House Initiative is a curatorial collaborative and artists union concerned with ideas of freedom, established in 2010 by Zasha Colah and Sumesh Sharma in Bombay. Strategies of equality have informed their work, while experiments in the re-reading of histories, and concerns of representation and visibility, are ways to imagine alternative economies and freedom.

Sumesh Sharma (1983) is a curator informed by alternate art histories that often include cultural perspectives informed by socio-economics and politics. Immigrant Culture in the Francophone, Vernacular Equalities, Movements of Black Consciousness in Culture are his areas of interest. In 2010, he co-founded the Clark House Initiative, located in Bombay, India. Sumesh is currently a resident of Parasite, Hong Kong.

About the author

[Amanprit Sandhu](#)

Amanprit Sandhu is an independent curator and producer based in London, UK. She is the co-founder of the curatorial collective DAM Projects. The collective use temporary exhibitions and events to support emerging, underexposed and unorthodox artists, art scenes, discourses and debates.

Recent roles include Curator of the performance programme at Art13/14 London art fair (2012-14); Producer on the 2014 Folkestone Triennial (2013-14); Project Manager at Frieze Foundation (2012), and Assistant Curator at the Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art (2009-11).