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#### Venue

- Art/Critical Perspectives symposium, an initiative of the ECA/University of Sao Paulo Center for Studies in Modern and Contemporary Art, Sao Paulo, Brazil. Nov 2007

Convener Sonia Salzstein

## **Art and the historical imaginary**

### **Part I**

The globalizing process displays contradictory features: on the one hand, multiple geopolitical sites for testing the historical imaginary; on the other, the promise, through new technologies, of unconditional accessibility to new universals based on the abandonment of designated collectivities and their geographical provenance.

*Utopias*: Both propositions, the dialectic of site and of non-site, can be seen to have a utopian dimension and (therefore) an aesthetic. Site comes into play when the historical imaginary envisions a potential place-name and complements perceived political urgency with symbolic praxis.<sup>1</sup> Russia/ the Soviet Union occupied such a place in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ; the third world followed in the 1960s; what might be such a place-name today-- or is it the final blow of globalization to render place itself redundant? At the opposite end, 'pure' negativity<sup>2</sup> that projects into a fictional no-place (partially coinciding with Sonia Salzstein's *projectulaity* ), and that once clinched utopian promise within a critical node so as to engage and problematize the universal-- that negative dialectic is now run aground by global culture. In its major mediation between art and social life, culture and politics, globalism (ubiquitously institutionalised) may in fact leave less unmediated ground where alternatives can be staked.

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<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson

<sup>2</sup> Adorno

*Public Sphere* :Even taking account of its radically dispersed practice, art is now frequently seen to be inadequate to the tasks of the world, leave alone utopian or militant politics.<sup>3</sup> Bodies, boundaries, mappings are in a state of unprecedented upheaval—‘terra infirma’, Irit Rogoff calls it.<sup>4</sup> While undermining the very metaphor of geography as politics, her wager -- to press the doubt about ‘the *where* of *now*’-- pitches art beyond local emplacement, and universal embrace. Committed nevertheless to the logic of democratic norms, Rogoff proceeds to acknowledge signifying practices that mark actual zones of (maximal) conflict. I would like to reiterate that politics mediated in the public sphere still remains a hypothetical locus of constantly shifting ground of radical intervention by artists (and activists); and that even given the claim of unprecedented accessibility in the Net-Commons, appropriate *forms* of address within the classic public sphere are still sought to be produced. I will exemplify my claim in relation to some Indian artists later on.

If contemporaneity now recognizes countless forms of expression, rendering ‘the image of the world through art’ obsolete, what are the conditions of possibility for the expanded practice of art/ history to reconfigure meaning nevertheless? This not only entails a skeptical reconsideration of art historical methodology and connoisseurship protocols, but a much more serious evaluation of how the cognitive privilege of art might now be defended (or not). If the absolute value of aesthetic contemplation subsides, it may foreground the discursive in art or, on the other hand, force us to (go beyond the modernist prejudice against theatricality and) recognize the performative as a means of mimetic excess and potential alterity.

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<sup>3</sup> Thus the integration of art and life has, at several historical moments, been deemed to be a utopian quest: in the 1960s Marcuse promised, on behalf of life and eros, to annihilate the distance between art/culture, and society. Paradoxically, however, the destiny of art may seem now to devolve into life-style desires in what is a totalizing dream of the global economy. The era of finance capital all but erases the history of production and manufacture, of labour and use-value, so that contemporary art in a globalized world-- flush with rising exchange-value and hectically commoditized—tricks not only civilizational memories, cultural difference and their art-historical equivalents, but also even the very avantgarde with its utopian link to productivist agendas and its dialectical play with individual and collective emancipation.

<sup>4</sup> Rogoff, *terra infirma*

*Representation et al:* Representational practices are always in a sense to do with mimesis that has in turn to do with re-enactment. Today and in the past, whenever representational claims are at stake, performativity will help translate, through mimetic play, cultural needs into artistic surplus, the surplus into new convergences. The question of representation, belonging properly to art as it belongs properly to politics, lies at the heart of art-historical studies. It is significant that it is also the prime problem thrown up in the upheaval created by decolonization and key to the ethical dimension of postcolonial studies.

I want to link it here to what I have been saying-- but via the trope of translation, the best techniques of which break epistemic barriers and yet give us a measure of both, the *excess* and the *lack* in the active transaction of addressed meaning. The transubstantiation to which translated meaning aspires, and the “elusive liquidity”, the “cloud of disturbance” that “perpetual translation” yields<sup>5</sup>, makes translated representation in culture always paradoxical. “And that is another way of thinking about what is *not* and can never be inside representation-- the untranslatable.”<sup>6</sup> Crucial within cultural theory and a means to work out what is at stake in intercultural/trancultural spaces of art production, translation, or *what is untranslatable* also, ironically, abuts the modernist conception of a work of art, the intrepid (Adornian) definition that favours formal autonomy, coding, obscurity, negativity, secrecy and the twist of meaning.

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<sup>5</sup> Stuart Hall and Sarat Maharaj, *Modernity and Difference*, in *IVAnnotations* 6. , p 43-46

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Hall: *Modernity and Difference*, *ibid.*, p43)

*Iconophilia and iconoclasm:* But here I want to hold in abeyance the formal as such and introduce a couple of concepts to do with the interpretation of meanings by virtue of a particular regard toward the object of art. A classic art-historical approach considers the art object a fully formed phenomenon that is yet part of a morphology. The cultural studies approach privileges the study of contextualized practice—where art is a cultural artefact more or less undifferentiated in its type of affect within the larger material and symbolic field. Is there (what might be called a) post-facto regard of the object--where the object and its phenomenological experience, practice and its contemporary context, tradition and historical discourse, are able to zigzag into a series of disciplinary fields, addressing the antinomies of art and culture without looking for a resolution?

Borrowing from Boris Groys, I foreground the concepts of iconoclasm and iconophilia within the meaning regimes of an art work.<sup>7</sup> Elaborated by him in writing about the peculiar, crossed, roles of curator/art historians within the contemporary, his very bold attributions of intent—of transactions between the seemingly superseded concerns about the sacred and the profane-- are tuned to an art historical discourse that runs the entire course from premodern to new media practices. These concepts illuminate, on the one hand, the very nature of art in its objecthood; on the other they call up the historically irreversible secularizing drive. The one is related to an immanence of the concrete, the compulsions of visibility, and of presence as a phenomenological fact; and the other with the development of a public sphere with players who would strip the artwork of its aura—not only in continuation of a technological makeover of production (and reproduction), but as a radical gesture of breaking class and caste and communal hegemonies. Suspicious as art historians are of the explosion of contemporary curatorial practices, they can be seen to play with the alternating dynamic of iconoclasm and iconophilia and position the artist's work in contingent and volatile ways.

I want to push this pair of concepts with other themes which interest me especially -- event and memory; the documentary and the archive. If event and memory are hypostatized by politically charged memorializing practices or, today, plain media attention—both producing a form of iconophilia; then the documentary and the archive are precisely the means to decathect and disenchant the material for purposes that are iconoclastic, in that they are contextualized as lived experience, and narrativized within secular space. This quartet is in a sense the testing ground for the 'truth' of the contemporary, as it is also the crucible within which a major aspect of the modern is enshrined: the very ground of realism in the 19th<sup>h</sup> century; and the role of the

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<sup>7</sup>essay titled: 'The Curator as Iconoclast', *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating*, apex art, new York, 2007.

witness in the 20th century imaginary, continues into the documentary/video which has become a preferred form of what we may call verite- fictions today. <sup>8</sup>

## **Part II:**

### ***Hidden Face (DVD)***

## **Part III**

### **The Trope of Mortality**

Since the mid-1990s, a small number of Indian artists, along with a growing number of Indian documentarists interfacing with experimental auteurs, have referred, quite significantly, to the terms of citizenship in a crisis-bound civil society. Declaring their partisanship towards communities named and shattered through majoritarian violence ( Muslims faced with Hindutva politics); towards a populace subjected to indifferent governance ( *dalits* and *adivasis* disregarded by globalizing development), these artists find ways to address the state seen to betray its own constitutional narrative of a just society.

These artworks tend to be metonymically structured, object-photo-video installations, such that an alternative space is opened out. Corresponding to the space of (historical) rupture, this can be called an avantgarde space, whereby the artist is impelled to investigate the fraught site of the social—here framed by the national-- via an advanced semiotic; via a carefully worked ‘system’ of heterogeneous *and* heterodox signs, that allows social imaginaries to be assembled – *and disassembled*. While the symbolic is always too heavily invested with authority, the space of rupture is spanned by a sequential narrative of (named) *event* and (constructed) *memory*: it is in its way a replete space, seething with the plenitude of mortal remains....

By acknowledging the precariousness of life within a global dystopia, acts of representation seem to offer a reconstitutive promise for the threatened body. Apprehended in the practice of art, representation can be seen to somehow redress the cruelly exposed corporeality of the citizen-subject. I refer to acts of representation as one might refer to acts of mourning or, on the other hand, to optimistic acts of the political will. And I suggest we seek in such representational acts, the fragile ‘truth-value’ of autonomous subjectivities (of artist and interlocutor), as well as the failure of citizens (here, *artist-citizens* ) to embody an ethics of interdependence. To navigate this form of criticality we need, perhaps, to surmount the spectacle of contemporary art with the chastening trope of mortality, a trope that the present political so definitively foregrounds.

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<sup>8</sup> Micael Renov

But if bodies are already in the process of becoming unreal before the apparatus of the sovereign state, their representation can produce a reductive charade. The practice of art, framed by an exercise of sovereignty that, in the present conjuncture, promotes state, sectarian and global violence, can be said to lend agency to coercive governance via acts of representation. On an opposite plane, representation as (artistic) affect, or what one might call 'pure' presentation, may too-quickly sublimate the vulnerability of body and subject into an erotics of pain and its counterfoil, moral asceticism; into freedom *in extremis*; into euphoric forms that cut loose from the politics of emancipatory representation. So how does art help to perform the ceremony of encountering the 'face' within de-humanization that the very rhetoric of sovereignty and the state so well conceal?

I refer here to artworks with a structure of address that admits these questions. I refer especially to artists in India who are, like artists elsewhere, struggling with the political moving irreversibly into the 'unhomely'-- into phantom scenes in global space, as Okwui Enwezor recently put it.<sup>9</sup> Here, as never before, the spectre of 'bare life' must be both embraced and struck down...so as to regain a form of humanity that can nurture compassionate acts including acts of representation, reparation and political redress.

**Amar Kanwar's** documentation, cinematic *mise-en-scene*, and style of narration (often his own voice-over) and cinematographic choice (of POV) are tuned to the body of disenfranchised citizen: the person who, despite constitutionally sanctioned rights, is deprived/stripped/ reduced to an ambivalence that makes for a less-than- individual, even less-than-human life. This is by virtue of classical political processes that allow the power of sovereignty to be invested in a prioritized caste/ class/ and State. Kanwar investigates these life conditions over vast terrain not only on recognizable fronts, as for example the cause of the dissidents within the Indian nation state-- but in terms of the representational means themselves.

These are means by which the face-- real, abstract -- may be hidden or perhaps suitably refracted through cinematically fabricated veils, so that the gaze has to *find its way* to the image. So that the body, even when appropriated by the dominant ideology, may, by way of its transference to image, be somehow protected from over-exposure. I am speaking about the holding capacity of the camera and even more of the cinematographer's look when it sustains itself before the site of humiliation. Not dispersed, by discursive textuality and well-meaning contextualization that characterizes the documentary genre, this body, this face, must contain the palpable life-force in its very vulnerability. So what Kanwar tracks must actually *survive its own*

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<sup>9</sup> Okwui Seville Biennale.

*representation*. This can happen when the subject is left precariously suspended in the ‘prison of the soul’ by the very temporality of the medium, the time-image which blurs the body into its own sign and ‘dies’—surviving as an after-image within the ethical imaginary.

In order to determine the subject-position of the disenfranchised citizen, Kanwar as filmmaker, has to determine his own. “The structure of address is important for understanding how moral authority is introduced and sustained ....” (Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*<sup>10</sup>) Not by stamping one’s name upon one’s will but, rather, by leaving that position at risk, by yielding to impingements, to the demand of the voice that comes from elsewhere. His film *Night of Prophecy* (2002) reverberates with that voice from elsewhere, the elsewhere of the Indian nation, to be precise, and so as not to miss the tone and pitch and metaphor by which moral demands are relayed, Kanwar, allows the self to be in doubt about the rights of representation involving others. The filmmaker becomes, in one sense, a liminal presence—he is very much present nevertheless, accounting for his own narrativization in speech; as a form of his own itinerancy; and in establishing the very *poetics of loss* as filmmaker, treating it as a spatial phenomenology conditioned by the moving image itself. The interface between objectif (camera) and the empirical world, the basic aesthetic of the cinema, is always in a sense *exceeded* by Kanwar; and the fact of real absences within the legitimated social, the perceived attribute of redundancy, is raised by him to become a metaphysics, attended by a melancholy that could be said to obfuscate options in history. But even as Kanwar establishes continuities with philosophic traditions that reflect dispassionately on mortality, Buddhism for example (in *A Season Outside*, 1998), the melancholy is redeemed by a reflexivity, by an active debate between non-violence and peoples’ struggle, between memory and history.

*Night of Prophecy* sets up a near-melodramatic narrative of (self) discovery/ journey through the country, the nation, the State. Kanwar testifies to the habitat of the dalit, of the ‘oppressed’, dalit being a name adopted by political communities of untouchables in Indian caste hierarchy. **Bare life** in almost the strict sense of the term, the untouchable is the one who is so degraded—by birth—that he may indeed be killed with impunity but never, in his irrevocable *impurity*, be ever consecrated, ever sacrificed to the gods, ever become sovereign-self, or sovereign-citizen in normal public life. Through a cinematographic choice of the *ground* for his (the dalit poet’s) expletives—which is the ground zero of social existence played across the city of Mumbai--Kanwar tries to understand how nihilism must be seen as the deferred moment of resistance, and of action, that is not, except through the trope of allegory, actually acted out in the film. There is plenty of allegory, both at the local level of story telling among the dispossessed —

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<sup>10</sup> p130

the magnificent Gadar performing his militancy before a peasant audience—but also in the meta-narrative where discrete instances of dissent, protest and combat, form an allegory of and for the (Indian) nation rethinking (being made to rethink) the discourse and practice of sovereignty.

**Vivan Sundaram's** video, *The Brief Ascension of Marian Hussai* (2005), asks a young (almost inevitably low-caste) waste-picker in metropolitan Delhi to perform his own apotheosis. Helped by some mechanical and digital tricks, Marian Hussain, who earns a living for his mother and siblings by carting urban waste to its dealers, lifts himself off the rubbish heap. He rises through and above a make-shift shelter, a cadmium-yellow plastic-mattress, swinging above the street like a trapeze artist. The accompanying score yielded by a musician playing on balloons, a three-penny one-man-band, turns his fantasy into a balletic triumph. Before our eyes we see a visual sketch of what Brecht taught us: that the states of denial and deprivation in social life seek, in the will of the protagonist, a moment of refusal. But rather than expend these in a staged catharsis, the will must be stoked to raise a response in the observer waiting to play a complementary role. Brecht is the one to show how the working class—and Marian Hussain is a juvenile worker—must ever and again strategize itself, or be thus positioned as to gain representation in dialogic forms and imaginary tableaux, in art and discourse as, of course, in politics.

Sundaram's Marian Hussain echoes something of Helio Oiticica's young performers, often samba dancers in and outside the favelas of Brazil, who ran and danced in rhythm to their own energy, wearing the transsexual *Parangole* capes, those rough and tacky 'magical' capes, their bodies supporting these clothing-utterances, these libertarian slogans: "I am Possessed", "Of adversity we live", "I embody revolt"... And this leads me to a series of coincidental connections: Brazil is the country that happens today to have the most organized waste pickers' organization—a kind of trade union of global economy's metro-scavengers—to which, perchance, Marian Hussain's waste-pickers' support organization in New Delhi, Chintan, is in dialogue! The coincidence is of course perfectly expected: the globalizing economies of the erstwhile Third World function with similar conditions of poverty and labour. Ironically, it is economies of Brazil, India and South America, that together, as partners on a fast track within the euphemistic project called structural adjustments, facilitate the current process of capitalist globalization.

The *Memorial*, also by **Vivan Sundaram**, is a large room-size installation made more than a decade ago, also begins with the image of a horizontal body: but this is an bearded man killed on

a street in Bombay while fleeing his besieged home during the Hindu-Muslim riots in 1993. A newspaper photographer, Hoshi Jal, took this image of the aging Muslim, lying on his side, clutching a small cloth bundle of belongings. The contour of his body silhouetted against a toppled garbage-container, his profoundly still face with closed eyes pressed close to the littered road-- the man's felled stance has the grace of a perfect performance. But this is no performance: the man's image is already mediated by our trust in the *a priori* realism of the photograph, its ability to capture the status of representation-as-*verite*. Because the apprehension of the real is already established, we, on this side of the camera, automatically assume the role of a witness, a role meant to signal responsibility and mourning but a role that is nevertheless rendered passive by the completeness of the representation.

Sundaram lived with the black and white photo for a year before he worked a physical memorial for the dead man, a labour of love whereby he embalmed, fetishized, incarcerated the photo-body. Remember Antigone's act when she stages her responsibility of covering and burying the dead in the face of an injunction by the sovereign/state that has stripped a body in death to the condition of **bare life**, leaving it displayed as taboo. In defying the law that is always twinned with violence, Antigone restores the human to—not bare, not sacred not even sovereign-- but how Brecht would have it, to its human status. Sundaram annotates this with his own refusal of those genres of representation that overdetermine the human within a scopic regime. Defacing realism's claim through spare, severe, acts of nailing, burning, erasing, hurting, protecting the photo-body; crucifying, wreathing, veiling it with paper and gauze, of casting it in plaster, incasing it in steel, marble, glass, and plastic, he does more than memorialize it. The one who has been killed is now also, cruelly, symbolically sacrificed whereby he may gain mythic significance as of the Greeks or, with Sundaram, on this side of life, gain *secular rights*. In a later, closing gesture of the installation and enactment, he opens the possibility that this body, now palpably beyond the conventional dignity of realism, be hypothetically conveyed on a miniature coffin-cortege, to the gateway of the State. So that the State acknowledges in the ironically constructed trope of sacred rites, the secular right to life of its own dead citizens.

In 2003, **Anuradha Kapur** produced, along with the video-documentary artist, Ein Lall, a Hindi adaptation of the Sophocles/Brecht play, *Antigone*. The project came in the wake of the Muslim genocide in Gujarat. It interposed the text with documentary footage related to recently destroyed lives, videoed enactments, pictorial renderings. And, as Brecht would have liked, it alluded unmistakably to a specific historical moment of complicity between the state's law and mob violence that exposed yet again the lacunae in the civil society of the seemingly well-constituted polity of modern India. Anuradha Kapur's other recent production, *Centaurs*, based

on a Heiner Mueller play of the same title, interleaves the free-verse text of the original play with passages from a recent text by the social theorist, Mahmood Mamdani, titled ironically, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*. Mueller's dark parable about the perversities of state power, including post-second-world-war socialist societies, and the de-humanization—in the literal sense of the word—of the civil servant, moves into the existing condition of **bare life** that 'absolutist' capitalist regimes create on a racist and sectarian principal. Here surveillance, which features in this stage-production as a visual shadow to the text spoken by actors is shown to stalk life already made precarious by Statist systems of coercion and actual torture. Stalking migrant labour, refugees and exiles and now, above all, terror suspects, is recording technology commandeered by naked power in its move to annihilate mortal lives and adversarial discourse, ethnicities and religions, seen to be un-conducive to their own voracious economies.

Undertaken in the name of democracy, this unprecedented cynicism is inscribed into Anuradha kapur's text and performance of *Centaurs*. When, at the end of the performance, the actor curls into a ball to be carried away, another cycle of action must start. Even the passive or hostile observer is not entirely impervious to the affective demonstration of injustice or degradation *if* the performance is structured so as to create a frisson of contradictions, slowed reflexivity, and the courage to act. Theatrically this starts with the invention of a telling gesture, Brecht's 'social gest', which, once demonstrated, demands unpacking. Instigated by the necessary cunning of the playwright, dramaturge, performer, the structure of address leads up to the social gest; and if this is historically pitched, if it pays close attention to a dialectical rendering of the very contradictions that prefigure adversity, a struggle is, can be, predicated.

Also in 2003, the painter, **Atul Dodiya** responded to the massacre in his ancestral Gujarat, by a room-size installation based on a design from the provincial museum in the coastal city of Porbandar, dedicated to Gandhi, 20th century's greatest advocate of non-violence who happened also to be the martyred son of Gujarat. Dodiya continues to play affectionate chess-games with the 'mahatma' except here, in *Broken Branches*, he emulated Gandhis's historical understanding of expiation and mourning conducted with and on behalf of the populace and followed him further by being a tendentious witness. What does an artist do in the face of state repression of minorities, in the face of a civil breakdown, public anxiety, family grief? Not addressing this directly, Dodiya collects souvenirs, meagre trophies of broken lives in the everyday—of those who are sick and disabled, working people, archivists, lost travelers, victims and fathers, and he places them lovingly in cabinets that resemble those in the Gandhi museum. Thousands were killed in Gujarat in 2002; but even those that are not killed nor sacrificed, can otherwise easily

disintegrate in the common course of a hard life, and the prominent inventory of bones and prosthetics in the cabinets serve as proof of such redundant forms of mortality. Constructing an allegory through fragments of the body in the form of what could be ex-votos, fetishes, he displays attributes of **bare life** with the purpose of *not* representing it, with the purpose of secretly consecrating it, with the purpose of collecting and preserving condensed motifs of deaths that need to be accounted for despite the bareness and the taboo that turn them into debris.

There is however one fact in the entire room of cabinets that is entirely representational: a newspaper photograph of a young Muslim man in pure panic. The nation bowed its head in shame when the newspapers published the photograph of this man who was later, after he had survived the massacre, identified as Qutubuddin Nasseruddin, a young tailor from Ahmedabad, folding his hands for mercy before what must have been a marauding crowd of Hindutva killers. The dead man that haunted Sundaram and thousands of others who saw the photo in the *Times of India* in 1993, prodded Sundaram to both veil and unveil the face, to both prod and recompose the body-- till it yielded a deeper meaning, a meaning beyond evidence. Qutubuddin's is a full, frontal face, and Dodiya places it on the wall like a picture, a poster, fully exposed and thereby unrelenting in its universal induction of pain and guilt and a desperate resolve—that a process of reparation begin now. Dodiya underlines his allegorical archive with what may be, if we believe the photo, a broken promise of the last witness....

Judith Butler again but quoting Levinas: “The face as the extreme precariousness of the other....”<sup>11</sup> And she quotes again: “...The approach to the face is the most basic mode of responsibility. The face is... the other before death, looking through and exposing death....the face is the one who asks not to let him die alone, as if to do so would be to become an accomplice in his death. Thus the face says to me: you shall not kill....”<sup>12</sup>

**Amar Kanwar's** short film, *To Remember*, shown at the death anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi in 2003, a year after the genocide we have been referring to, hardly shows the face of Gandhi within the selected footage: instead it shows the memorial site where he was shot dead, Indian peasants filing past the vitrines, documentary footage of Gandhi in riot-torn cities during the Hindu-Muslim carnage just before and after Independence. In the end he does show one face, the placid face of Gandhi's murderer, Nathuram Godse, who proclaimed his moral righteousness during the public trial—again addressed to the grieving nation—and who thus became the hidden face of those nationalists, who wanted, at the inauguration of the Indian nation, to see the republic

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<sup>11</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, p 134.

<sup>12</sup> (Butler p 131-132)

become a majoritarian, a nearly fascist regime of Aryan-Hindu blood. This lineage reappears in the name of Indianness till today in popular, even electoral politics. To counter this false consciousness, Amar Kanwar brings Gandhi's lean and fleeting image into his films time and again—where, by virtue of the pale, flickering, silent, scratchy stock, and by virtue of the way Kanwar frames the archival shots in the film—Gandhi looks to be a liminal figure. Yet all the more does he lend himself to signify authenticity, compassion, intransigence and courage—and the ambivalences that attend these moral attributes of a political figure. If Gandhi is simultaneously the man who is murdered and the man who is sacrificed—overcoming the paradox at the heart of the concept of **bare life**—he can be read to demonstrate more imaginatively and conscientiously than almost anyone else in our times, the struggle to both sustain and transcend the humility, and humiliation, attached to **bare life**. For his own purpose, Amar Kanwar signifies in his films, how we can balance the freedom and necessity of any given political choice, to discern the strait course of justice elicited from the anguish concerning ends and means; how, by a combination of eccentric and disciplined moves, public action can be launched that is simultaneously a call for resistance and a call for participation; and again how, through each appropriate action, we can restore the one possible universal aim: of human dignity.

**Navjot Altaf's** work is about trauma and testimony but without reference to either. Her mode of displacement, her abstraction, her precisely chosen poetics, makes her the appropriate artist to close this exposition. As we try to work through event, memory, documentation and the archives of social suffering in the contemporary, what surfaces is a peculiar constancy--the condition of human precariousness. Common citizens denuded of subjecthood or on the other hand held guilty for an illegitimate bid to sovereignty within the new global—these lives will not even be classified as victims. While Navjot refers to specific instances of majoritarian assault and State terror in India as in recent world history, in works such as *Between Memory and History* (2001-02) and *Lacuna in Testimony* (2003-06), she enters it always in the aftermath when she can see the suffering recede in favour of that peculiar resolve that human beings make to finally *face* the other for the sake of life.

To continue a little with Butler and her inscription of Levinas in contemporary global politics—“...the human is indirectly affirmed in that very disjunction that makes representation impossible, and this disjunction is conveyed in the impossible representation. For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give.” (Butler's words, p 144)

*Lacuna in Testimony* is a multi-projection video where Navjot Altaf inscribes a succession of subliminal images on the ebb and tide of the ocean -- the Arabian Sea -- striking the extended coastline of Mumbai. The three adjacent screens, installed with a set of reflecting mirrors on the floor that multiply the image, develop a visually identical but time-staggered ritual of 'evidence': digitally generated window-cubes open in succession on the surging surface of a purplish-blue ocean and as the frosty 'panes' clear, you glimpse faint shapes: threatening images, possibly documentary images that fade before you can decipher their contours. The grid of cubes completes itself in one and then the next and the next screen, vanishing at the point of completion. The relay is conducted on a steady pulse that is like the silent ticking of a time-bomb, a portent that materializes in the form of a waking dream. Once the windows dissolve, the roaring waves turn crimson in rhythm with a child's voice recorded at a refugee camp in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. The boy's illegible wail fills the lacuna of his, and our, memory and brings him, perhaps, to a healing station. The minimally notated video-recording of the ocean-loop returns to offer a metaphor for the mounting trauma of countless testimonies lashing the shores of the earth.

Geeta Kapur