

SELF AS SITUATIONAL EXPERIMENT: AN ONGOING CONVERSATION BETWEEN SONIA KHURANA AND NANCY ADAJANIA.

By Nancy Adajania

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Nancy Adajania: I am deeply moved by the ground note of loneliness in your work. A strange language of loss informs 'Logic of Birds'. The body lies exposed like an open wound on a road full of strangers, vulnerable to the inquisitive beaks of iridescent pigeons waiting for communication. What does the body pine for? Mother's feed, lover's touch, sleep or the spectacle of anonymity....

Sonia Khurana: At that time, I thought that 'Logic of Birds' was a direct consequence of the recent spate of incidents in my life, leading among other things to a sense of profound loss. This got translated into a query about the psychological implications of loss. The impulse to lie on the ground and feel the cold asphalt recurred several times, for different reasons. I was then in other cities and other things flowed into my consciousness. At that moment, I was at the demonstrations about the attack on Lebanon in Paris, in the summer of 2006. I was shooting, making images. I felt the deep desire to lie down like that, in Place de la Bastille, and then later in other places, as I traveled. I suppose this was a way of playing out a certain state of dereliction inherent within us.

It has occurred to me, in retrospect, that the language in which I chose to express this new state of mind was, in fact, very much in tune with my ongoing interrogations of 'self-appointed' positions of powerlessness, and how the dynamics of these are played out in our day-to-day existence. I believe that the act of divesting oneself of power is ultimately empowering. This can be profound as well as ironical.

NA: I am reminded, here, of what Gandhi called satyagraha, the 'force of truth' or the 'invitation to truth'. By divesting oneself of all power, one in fact gains tremendous power, the tremendous authority of the renouncer and the teacher. This is an impossible project, but one that generates many productive outcomes long before it reaches its goal.

You have always been very candid about the psychological and emotional impulses that activate your work, but these never detract from the conceptual basis of your performances. Significantly, your examination of the 'self-appointed positions of powerlessness' is provided with a caveat emphasising the 'profound

and ironical' nature of this act. Clearly, your entry point into the discourse of power and powerlessness is a deliberately tangential one.

I warm to the manner in which private and public experiences get layered over one another in your consciousness and summon up tactical responses. I recall that while you were in the process of making 'The World' (which parsed the various kinds of homelessness), two events had occurred simultaneously: the Gujarat earthquake and the sale of your family home in Saharanpur. While certain socio-political events or natural catastrophes are bound to impact a person's sense of self, you never make works that address such issues directly. Instead, you perform a satyagraha to attain selfhood, experimenting with the self, abandoning it on the road in a streetside protest, a *dharna* ('Logic of Birds') or going on a long journey on foot, a *padayatra* ('Flower Carrier'). [1] But you preserve an ironic distance from the experimenting self, to keep the edge between power and powerlessness slippery, always edgy.

SK: You describe it very well. I prefer to make such references in an oblique manner. And in this context I often paraphrase Trinh T. Min-ha: 'I like to speak nearby, not about'.

NA: In 'The Flower Carrier' and 'Urban Tramps', we meet dispossessed figures who enact their private lives in the absolute glare of public appearance. Portraying yourself as a 'crazy' woman walking on the road clutching at a single forget-me-not in 'The Flower Carrier' brings to mind the female renunciates in Indian society who have renounced the limitations of their domestic life to attain spiritual enlightenment. You again rupture the textures of the everyday with 'Urban Tramps', where you play the hobo or vagrant wheeling your strolley through the posh neighbourhoods of Delhi. What is it that attracts you to these figures? The need for *vairagya*, renouncing the world, a need that is provoked by feelings of abandonment and homelessness.

SK: To begin with, I would like to talk about some of my concerns with the performing of the abject, especially the power or the lure of the abject. I am immensely concerned with a corporeal understanding of the body. I find that corporeal significations are better resolved through performance. Through performance, I can engage with the constant struggle between body and language, to achieve a corporeal eloquence.

I could say that another underlying desire was to recuperate the lost or residual 'body matters' which lurk, unattended to, on the sidelines of the social. We are only too aware that, generally, insufficient attention is paid to the ways in which gendered bodies have always enjoyed varying degrees of absence or presence in the sociological imaginary. For example, in the often-repeated guise of female corporeality and male embodiment.

NA: What do you mean by lost or residual 'body matters'? That which is discharged by the body...

SK: To me, 'body matters' is not so much a reference to a substance or the materials of the body. Instead, when I say 'matter' I am referring here to something that is being considered and needs to be dealt with. The body as something that is extended in space and persists through time, phenomenologically. Also, the body as something that is important, and makes a difference: *matters*.

In 'Logic of birds', the engagement or the task of contemplation – of the self and the body – reaches another level, when contemplation requires direct intervention: touch. This to me is quite a move from what I am proposing in works such as 'Bird'.

NA: While you were at the Royal College of Art, did you explore video and performance art by Western feminists of the 1970s? Did this prepare you to express the potential of the performative in an early work like 'Bird' (1999)?

SK: Not really. At least not in a conscious way. At the time I tended to be reclusive and therefore somewhat oblivious to references. I primarily worked with intuition, interiority, and self-referentiality.

In a superficial way, my point of entry, so to speak, into the performative was my familiarity with activist theatre. I grew up doing a lot of theatre in Saharanpur as a kid, because my father was very much involved in the Workers' Movement and trade unions, and was closely associated with the Leftist Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA)

However, when it came to choosing a medium, I chose to study art, as outside of dance and theatre, the discourse on performance art in India has been non-existent till very recently. So unless one counts these early associations with theatre, I simply stumbled upon the performative aspects of my work. My way of working comes out of a need for resistance to the conventions of all visual art forms, including theatre. Having said this, I do remember being quite inspired by say: Pina Bausch, whose work I first saw in 1993, in Delhi.

NA: What is it about Pina Bausch's work that you particularly respond to?

SK: I am very interested in themes that resonate throughout her work: corporeality, the body, love, loss, alienation, unrequited desire, and self-inflicted violence and pain... I suppose I could name some other great performers and artists as well, whom I greatly admire, but basically, this is to say that I subscribe to Bausch's kind of understanding of the epic, of the surreal and of duration, especially slowness, and quite importantly, of repetition. So these are some of

the things that I subconsciously strive to engage with in my works at an aesthetic as well as political level.

Notes:

Satyagraha was Mahatma Gandhi's preferred term for an idiom of resistance that confronted oppression not only at the material but also at the spiritual level. From the same Gandhian tradition of resistance come the '*dharna*', the 'sit-down strike' that embodies a refusal to become complicit in the mechanism of hegemony and subjugation enacted by the oppressive Other, and the '*padayatra*', the long journey undertaken on foot, to mobilise a population while setting an example of self-discipline and heroic exertion.

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