

Eyelips

On Tejal Shah: *Between the Waves*

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All work entails relation, correspondence, reference (and reverence), connections, proximities, and fabulation. The five-channel video installation *Between the Waves*² by Tejal Shah consists of five chapters, each corresponding to a poem by Minal Hajratwala, who is also one of the performers: Dreamtime, Catastrophe, Regeneration, Hedonism, Ache. In what follows I will repeat this five-channel/chapter structure, building upon it or, to use a phrase by Trinh T. Minh-ha, whose work Shah admires and often quotes, speaking nearby. This entails gossip, of course, and gossip is where fabulation meets the fabulous, as queer theory and film scholar / curator Marc Siegel has elaborated,³ but gossip is of course not just about content but about context. I am not just writing about a work. I am also writing from my own personal connection, which also begins with an anecdote. It was a chance encounter that took place fifteen years ago, at the Filmhaus at Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, where I was then involved in the Lesbenfilmfestival at the Arsenal Cinema, an institution which later became very significant for me.⁴ They*⁵ were travelling through Europe with a friend, Natasha Mendonca (who did the camera in the “Ache” chapter). Natasha, like Tejal, has since become an acclaimed artist and filmmaker.⁶ Our encounter that day literally stopped us in our tracks. I took the two of them home that night (no, not like *that*). I remember it as one of those intense encounters where you’re not entirely sure what the intensity, the magic consists of. And little did we know then that chance would bring all our paths together time and again. A few years later Natasha and Tejal conceived *Larzish – Tremors of a Revolution* together, a film festival on sexuality and gender plurality which took place in Bombay for two consecutive years in 2003/04. I recall discussions about our experiences programming queer cinema. There have been several connections since, such as two events addressing the pogroms against Muslims in Gujarat, organized in

¹ I would like to thank Daniel Hendrickson for helping with 'my English'. Any odd formulations and language wrongdoings are entirely my responsibility though. N.H.

² Commissioned by and first presented at dOCUMENTA 13 in Kassel (Germany) in 2012.

³ “Neither true nor false but fabulous.”, Marc Siegel, “Vaginal Davis’s Gospel Truths.” *Camera Obscura* 23, no. 1 (2008): 151–59.

⁴ In 2005 I began working at the Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art, which runs the Arsenal Cinema, holds an expansive film and video collection and distribution, as well as running the Berlinale Forum. In the past decade I have been continuously connected to the Arsenal, at present as co-curator of Forum Expanded at the Berlinale (www.arsenal-berlin.de).

⁵ The choice of pronouns is Shah’s, see <http://tejalshah.in/info/>.

⁶ <http://natashamendonca.com/>.

Berlin in 2003 at b_books and the Heinrich Böll Foundation, with Tejal, Anissa Hélie, Britta Ohm and Nicole Wolf. Oh, and Tejal's first solo show was in Berlin too, the city in which I still live, at Gallery Alexander Ochs: "The Tomb of Democracy," also in 2003. Other encounters in various places followed. But let's begin. Five channels, Five chapters.

Quotations (are also a kind of gossip)

In 2011 Tejal is interviewed by Hans-Ulrich Obrist.⁷ Like her talk "Queer, EcoSexual Ancestors and Dreaming Unicorns in India" in November 2012 within the conference of the project "Dildo, Anus, Macht – Queere Abstraktion," their* trajectory is biography. They* recount for example: 1992 the move to the big city, 1998 leaving India to study in Australia, then the US, significant encounters; art becomes a possibility. Also the radicalization of sex and gender. There are continuous trajectories in their* work, such as performance, the blurring of fact and fiction, the archive, certain media. There are changes too, of course, the transformation of existing subjects. Shah describes *Between the Waves* as marking a shift – toward a queer ecology. I'll get back to that.

During the Q&A after the presentation in Vienna, Tejal Shah stated: "I guess for me, I need a book.... And a personal thing." So there are quotations, and references, recognitions. Most obviously of course Rebecca Horn's Einhorn [unicorn] performance, presented at documenta V in 1972, which in turn quotes Frida Kahlo's *The Broken Column* painting. And Unic Zürn's flesh and bondage sculptures, Trinh T. Minh-ha's *inappropriate/d other* and Donna Haraway's interspecies relations. But there is also what maybe only I see: a medley of Luis Bunuels *Le chien andalou* and Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* (in the last chapter, with pomegranates, nozzles, the unicorn-dildos, on a balcony in an urban sprawl. With close ups of labia opening like eyelids, shots of fingers rubbing eyelids, then a pussy, cutting from fucking with the unicorn-horn-dildo to a tongue licking an eye as if it is going to suck it open), and Afrofuturism's queer futurities. And then some. And then there is of course the impressive list of people who have worked with Tejal on the five videos: such as the performers, the dancers, the camera people, the sound designers, whose collaborative presence is beautifully tangible. These include, as already mentioned, Natasha Mendonca and Minal Hajratwala, then Ma Faiza (the amazing DJ), Anuj Vaidya, Kush Badwar (who belongs to the New Delhi-based collective "Word Sound Power"), Katell Gelebart (the designer who created the upcycling costumes), Suman Sridhar (singer, songwriter, actress), Floy Krouchi (musician, composer,

⁷ <http://tejalshah.in/2012/07/02/hans-ulrich-obrists-interview-with-tejal-shah-now-available-on-dvd/>.

sound artist), Amber Bemak,⁸ Dhanya Pilo (VJ, filmmaker, editor), Hari Dwarak Warrior (sound designer), the Hrishikesh Pawar Contemporary Dance Company in Poona, and many others.⁹

“Some kind of artist working on some kind of nature”¹⁰

Unicorn-dildoed creatures crawling over glistening salt fields, rolling in the breaking waves of the shore, plastic pieces and electronic artifacts dangling from their bodies like seaweed, dipping their fingers and other extensions in white glob with which mangroves then are groomed, floating through a turquoise pool filled with plastic fish and other shiny glamour, dancing over landfills, sucking pomegranate juice from lips, hands, eyelids, performing dramatic entrances, receiving signals emanating from the sky and reflecting the sun’s all-consuming blinding bliss with crescent silver moons. Tejal Shah calls these creatures humanimals. They are artificial creatures, imaginary beings in a future that is here and now, steeped in history as they are steeped in the landscapes.

The first chapter is reminiscent of a Harappan excavation site, the remains of one of the cities of the ancient Indus Valley Civilization. Some of those known sites are located in Haryana, Maharashtra, but mostly in Gujarat and in Pakistan. The visual reference to these places point to urgent and ongoing geopolitical faultlines also evoked by the appearance of the crescent moon in *Between the Waves*.¹¹ The Indus Valley Civilization was one of the three early civilizations of the Old World, the “Ancient East”, and was known for its sophisticated urban planning, which entailed intricate water supply and elaborate sewage and

⁸ Whose own work *Airplane Dance* appears to have been based on this collaboration. Amber Bemak calls it a transformation from failure into treasure (<http://amberbemak.com/filter/Experimental/Airplane-Dance-1>) without making direct reference to who the collaborators mentioned in the description were. I saw *Airplane Dance* installed in an exhibition in Berlin – “what is queer today is not queer tomorrow” NGBK Berlin (06-08.2014), http://ngbk.de/development/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=375&lang=en – and immediately recognized the resonance in the imagery. I mention this resonance not only to acknowledge what we all cherish, and what we assume queerness as ‘nonnormative organization of community’ (J. J. Halberstam) is based on: beginnings, collectivity, encounters (collaborations, love, sex, work), but also failures, hurt feelings, breakups (and in particular the breakups of collectives!), the clashes between academic and artistic authorship and the careers which are based on this structure and political ideas which are meant to spread, infect, be shared and not owned. Let’s begin to think about endings not just as failures but to theorize them and think about them with the same endeavor as we do about beginnings and programmatic proposals (such as manifestos).

⁹ For the full credits see http://tejalshah.in/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/CREDIT-LIST-BTW-3_8_2012.pdf.

¹⁰ <http://tejalshah.in/info/>

¹¹ The crescent moon has become a symbol for Islamic nations and institutions. But it is also connected to the Ancient civilizations – such as the moon god Nanna (sic!) in Sumer.

drainage systems. The cities also featured no monumental structures, no architecture of authority; no evidence of palaces or temples has been found and speculations about the extent of the egalitarian structures (only architecturally? or also socially?) abound. Aside from such speculations about lost origins,¹² which might help to envision a different future, the “discovery” of these excavation sites is also steeped deep in colonial history.¹³

On many of the seals found at these sites the unicorn is depicted, making them the first known images of these creatures. In recent years the unicorn has become a queer icon, a trans-animal, crossing the boundaries between nature and fabulation, a magical creature often accompanied in popular imagination with rainbows and sparkly glitter explosions. But also depicted mostly as white. *Between the Waves* reminds us that the unicorn once inhabited a different imaginary space and that in this contemporary queer fabulation only the artifices are white, the mounds of flesh bound by the unicorn-dildo-backbone-rib-constraint-support structures, the breasts and lips and hair are all shades of brown and black.

But *Between the Waves* isn't about nature vs. artificiality, about affirming authenticity, roots, belongings. The plastic pieces decorating the humanimal-creatures in the installation are cherished as just as beautiful as the natural props. The landfill sequence is just as much a natural habitat as the gleaming hot dry excavation site and the shady mangrove swamp or the monsoon heavy sky over the urban sprawl. To quote Trinh T. Minh-ha again: "... but since I work with resonances in displacement, I would ask, for example, what is artificiality in the context of spirituality? When you mentioned positioning as an artificial process, I immediately say yes, not because "artifice" connotes something not true or not real, but because the world caught in its life and death processes can be seen entirely in terms of artifice and artificiality. In other words, the world is a 'radical illusion', to use a term that artificially links Baudrillard to Buddhist thought. When one says man-made is all artificial, one is not necessarily implying that nature is

¹² The artist statement claims: "In popular imagination, Unicorns are associated with Western mythology, but through this performative video installation, the artist brings them back to their supposed original home, a region to which Shah also traces her family lineage." I find such tracings of roots highly dubious (but legitimate as speculative fictions).

¹³ When I first saw *Between the Waves* I was imagining that it had actually been shot in Mohenjo-daro. In reading about it I was coming across writings about a bronze statuette called *The Dancing Girl*, which had been found at the site. I am still puzzled, caught off guard, by the beautiful descriptions of the figure by various British archeologists: "A girl perfectly, for the moment, perfectly confident of herself and the world. There's nothing like her, I think, in the world." (Mortimer Wheeler) and "We may not be certain that she was a dancer, but she was good at what she did and she knew it." (Gregory Possehl).

truer. For ultimately, it is in producing the artificial that one manifests “truth” and gives shapes to one's situation.”¹⁴

Explicit

Porn is usually described as “explicit.” With post-porn this explicitness is no longer (just) about nudity, sexual organs, fluids, penetrations, cum shots, and the like. As a critique of modern Western pornographic reason post-porn includes the explication of an idea, of the critical subversion of given norms about gender and sexuality.¹⁵ Explicit then also refers to politics, to thought, to criticality.

Aiming big

Nudity in itself isn't really much of a reason for scandal. It has to be a specific kind of nudity. Or rather: the naked body is specific. It is not any body, or all bodies. Today it is, first and foremost, a thin body: A racialized, gendered, thin body. Seeing abundant flesh always seems to get remarked on. Seeing a big body naked is not another naked body enlarging the continuum of explicitness (big already insinuates a normality against which this body is measured. It is not an adjective, it's not a quality, it is a quantification within the regime of normalcy). It is a different body. It is the body that dares to differ. It is seen as different, and I believe its perception reveals a difference that is not about the naked body as such. Post-porn reveals not naked flesh but how it is charged. Seeing a big woman on screen is probably more gender disturbance than seeing lesbian sex.¹⁶

¹⁴ From an interview with Marina Gržinić conducted in 1998 (<http://trinhminh-ha.squarespace.com/inappropriated-artificiality/>). Another coincidence/connection: Gržinić was among the participants at the „Dildo, Anus, Macht – Queere Abstraktion” conference.

¹⁵ And here a small tribute to Tim Stüttgen (1977-2013), who co-conceived the “Queere Abstraktion” conference in Vienna and whose book on *Post-Porn Politics* (Berlin: b_books 2009) was among the influences for Tejal's work. <http://www.b-books.de/verlag/ppp/>.

¹⁶ I recall here the intense responses to Antonia Baehr's striptease leading up to the Martelli's Cat (*Felis lunensis*) episode in her *Abecedarium Bestiarium*. The movements are all familiar, but the removal of items of male drag, including a prosthesis for extra belly fat, defamiliarizes the genre and its iconography with apparently disturbing effects. The striptease culminates when the performer places her large breasts on a table, under a spotlight, turning them into independent creatures which are at the same time part of the crazy feline creature Baehr turns into. For impressions see the still photography by Anja Weber on the website of make up productions: http://www.make-up-productions.net/pages/gallery/m-is-for-martellis-quos-cat-felis-lunensis-by-valerie-castan_2302.php

Is the possible scandal of *Between the Waves*¹⁷ seeing prosthetic penetration? Is it the close-ups of eyelids and pussy lips? Or is it seeing big brown bodies, hairy bodies, folds of flesh, large breasts which have better things to do than point at the viewer?

Being seen

In the Q&A after Tejal's presentation at the conference, Antke Engel remarked on not just watching the piece but also watching the audience watching it, an audience she called "established." In this context, she concludes, a work like *Between the Waves* makes a strong argument. It would be easy for me to dismiss this as the externalization of internalized projections (after all, she was that very audience too, so on what grounds is such differentiation being made?). But the truth is: I too remember watching the installation in Kassel by looking at the people I was sharing the space with. Which in my case for the most part were two older, well made-up women speaking Russian. And what was I doing? I was projecting the evil straight audience onto them. They weren't very generous in providing food for my speculations though. They sat there fairly unagitated, concentrated, for a significant period of time (they did not, like I did, sit through the whole piece, but then again, most people don't do that in exhibitions). So what was happening there? I discarded the differences, which I refused to be seeing myself seeing, into a differentiation in the viewing space. THEY, not me. By in my assumption that this is a space not prepared for nor expecting transgressive and feminist corporeal richness, is it not me that is insisting on the very norm I am guessing is being undone in front of my very eyes? There are no indications that the contemporary art world is not willing to incorporate and digest genderqueer art. What if my viewing (and its theoretization) is based on an assumption that misses the point? The point not being that the art world – and its audiences – has become so queer, but that the question of difference (in representation, exhibition, and reception) needs to be reconfigured. But let me return to the work.

The viewing space of *Between the Waves* is also a very pronounced soundscape. It contains (almost) no dialogue and is satiated with intricate compositions. Rich, smacking sounds of touch, complex harmonies of birds and other tropical creatures, the various fluid sounds of water, ocean, rain, the

¹⁷ In addition to the main commissioning body, dOCUMENTA (13), *Between the Waves* was co-produced and co-funded by Barbara Gross Galerie in Munich and Bildmuseet in Umea, but also by India Foundation of the Arts in Bangalore and Project 88 in Mumbai. In their* talk in Vienna Tejal mentions that a museum in Sweden told them* they couldn't show the work, because the museum is a "family place." In conjunction with this Tejal also expressed doubts about the work's future in India. It has since been shown in Mumbai, at Project88 in 2013, albeit under the restrictive circumstances which apply to much critical contemporary art within the current political climate in India.

spherical sounds of birds, the sun, the space were not recorded on location but imagined and created, joined to the visual material as deep sonic layers.

No dialogue, and also almost no faces. Only fleeting moments, but mostly partial views. To withhold the face means avoiding frontality, refusing mirroring recognition: "The face-opposite takes the place of the head, which belongs to the physical spatial being as one of its body parts. The face-opposite is accentuated in its surface quality. For this reason it seems to be coupled to the imperative of immediately reading and identifying it, resolving its ambiguities."¹⁸

Between the Waves is indeed not a frontal but a visceral viewing experience. It is sticky, it asks for your complicity. It's utopian and dystopian at the same time. It denaturalizes nature and it turns wastelands into hospitable environments. Creatures mingle in it, and we mingle with them in this installation. Sometimes wondering about the space we share with it, and others, sometimes just getting lost in it, in the blazing heat at the excavation site, the heavy humid air at the shores of the sea and the city, in the grey and blue salt and the bright turquoise chlorinated water, in the forests of mangroves and the floating plastic flowers, in the blinding reflections of the silver discs of the digital optical disc data storage devices and of crescent moons scattered across the various channels of the work, in the artificial sounds of nature and the natural sounds of artifice, in the orifices, extensions, prostheses, between eyelids and pussy lips.

¹⁸ „Das Gesicht-gegenüber setzt sich an die Stelle des Kopfes, der als Körperteil zum leiblichen Raumwesen gehört. Das Gesicht-gegenüber ist in seiner Flächigkeit akzentuiert. Aus diesem Grund scheint es von Anfang an mit dem Imperativ, es zu lesen und zu vereindeutigen, verschwistert zu sein.“ Ulrike Haß, *Das Drama des Sehens. Auge, Blick und Bühnenform* (München: Wilhem Fink Verlag, 2005), 158.

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