

“Everything changes, when you change it”

Current urgencies, feminist legacies and political fictions

A workshop proposal

Concept and Convenor: Nicole Wolf

Participants: Sheba Chhachhi, Deepa Dhanraj, Madhusree Dutta

Convenor’s notes:

This workshop will start from three moments where the expansion of a documentary language repertoire evolved together with the questioning of an available political and judicial vocabulary. Each instance was produced from the vantage point of being a participant of a political movement while pushing representational practices through experimenting with political fiction. The women’s movements in India, from the early 80s to the early 90s, form the concrete context here. The workshop wants to start from the specificity of these moments to locate their particular enabling as well as challenging conditions with a view to thinking through the relations between cultural and political practice today.

The very importance of activating feminist legacies for interventionist cultural practices – cultures of the left - in the now is hereby posed and probed at the same time. The mode of addressing instances of a political archive of still and moving images is thus not for reasons of nostalgia but to first take account and narrate feminist forms of radicality in the past and to then critically reflect the possibility of reactivating their potential while acknowledging our respective historical or geographical distance to them.

How does an active linking between the urgencies, conditions and practices of the past and the present look like? Without viewing the past as a manual or tool kit to be replicated, what can be gained from reflecting on the kinds of resources that were deployed through film and art practices for interventionist practices? How were collectivity, friendship, pedagogy, standing-with in political and creative work, practiced and thought? How was the relation between open and autonomous gatherings and working in and through institutions or political parties debated? How was the need to challenge set representations addressed and new languages forged?

At stake is an urgent discourse on cultures of the left within our current, precarious and violent, global society.

Note on organization of the workshop:

The workshop would be introduced by the convenor, followed by three practitioner interventions and an open conversation with the workshop participants. The participant number is kept to three in order to be able to show films clips or slides and still stay within 30-40 mins for initial presentations.

If accepted we would like to particularly invite younger filmmakers, artists and scholars to respond to the short presentations to foster an inter-generational discussion.

(Should the workshop not be accepted, the convenor's note could be expanded into a single paper or a collaborative paper with one practitioner, the workshop is preferable though)

Participant contributions

1)

Record/ Resist – Revisiting a diverse archive of the Indian women's movements,
by Sheba Chhachhi

Record/ Resist was a recent installation through which Sheba Chhachhi revisited her expansive archive of photographs documenting more than 10 years of the Indian women's movement. From the early 80s onwards Chhachhi organized and participated in protests and actions of the autonomous women's movement, always together with her camera and documenting protest in ways which would counter the mainstream imagery of women. A shift occurred in Chhachhi's photography practice when 'women shouting slogans' became itself a media and a normative image and Chhachhi started her process of extending the vocabulary of the photographic image. Initially she collaborated with eight women who created and performed their own image of themselves, hereby adding staged and fictional elements to the photographic image. Later her photography gets further extended through sculptures, through interventionist projections in public spaces and in *Record/ Resist* itself through spatial installations. New spectatorial encounters with the photographed images, as material and performative representation, are continuously created. Chhachhi still sees feminism and the political theory attached to it as the starting point for her thinking and her art practice and similarly one might argue did her work feed into discourses of representations of the self and the female body. What did the process of revisiting the archive, and with it a political and artistic practice, including an expansion of the documentary register, signify? What were the political shifts that came with or through a changing practice, through experimentations with representational forms and the processes leading up to it?

List of Works/ Installations

Record/ Resist: Second Wave 2012 (Gwangju) / 2013 (New Delhi/ Noida)

(including documentary photographs of personal archive as well as photographic images from:

Seven Lives and a Dream (1998)

Biography:

Sheba Chhachhi lives and works in New Delhi. She studied at Delhi University, Chitrabani, Kolkatta and the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad. She has exhibited widely in India, Europe, Japan, South America and the U.S.A since 1993, both through solo shows and important group shows. She has published writings, given talks and conducted workshops, research and projects relating to women, conflict, urban ecologies, visual culture and contemporary art practice in India and South Asia.

Her practice drawing on both- the vernacular studio tradition and documentary - her photographic work is predicated on building a relationship with her subjects, the

photographs emerging from an invitation to perform the self. The desire to reinvest the viewing of photographs with time underwrites her use of the photographic image within installation works, often created together with found or “sculpted” objects, text, sound, light, video and as interventions into public spaces.

See: <http://www.volte.in/sheba-chhachhi-biography.php>

2)

Standing-With: Unarchiving Yugantar’s collective practice

By Deepa Dhanraj

Starting with Yugantar, one of the first state-independent film collectives in India which Deepa Dhanraj co-founded, she has since the early 1980s been committed to working at the interstice of non-fiction film and local women’s groups. Each of Yugantar’s films was developed with another group or constituency: *Tambaku Chaakila Oob Ali* develops its image and constructed voice-over through the narrations of female tobacco labourers who were in the process of unionizing, extending hereby vocabularies on labour. *Idhi Katha Matramena* was conceptualized together with the collective Sree Shakti Sangathana through intensive discussions on violence against women. The result of a short fiction film expanded not only the representation of women characters on screen at that time, but also took part in complicating the discourse on violence beyond dowry death and it being an issue of poor women. This process of working with as a standing-with one’s film subjects politically and deriving a film language from this encounter, has shaped Dhanraj’s filmmaking also after Yugantar. How can the potentials and challenges for this collective political and aesthetic practice be understood? How can a practice of working in-tandem-with remain dialogical and processual to keep questioning and pushing political vocabularies while also being committed to listening? And how has the institutionalisation of political formations altered the possibilities of this process? How can new political constituencies be formed on the way, through the filmmaking process?

List of Films:

Molkarin/Maid Servant (25 min.), 1981

Tambakoo Chaakila Oob Ali (25 min.), 1982

Sudasha (30 Min.), 1983

Idhi Katha Matramena/ Is this Just a Story? (25 min.), 1983

Kya Hua Is Shahar Ko? / What Has Happened to this City? (86 min.), 1986

I began to see the world for what it is (unpublished manuscript, co-authored)

Biography:

Deepa Dhanraj lives and works in Bangalore. She was born and brought up in Hyderabad, studied English literature at Madras University and journalism at Osmania University in Hyderabad. In 1980, she co-founded the Yugantar Film Collective, together with Abha Baiya, Meera Rao and Navroze Contractor, which produced four films between 1980 and 1983. Since then she has made numerous short films, educational films, and full-length documentaries. Many of her films revolve around issues of the women’s movement in India, of which she is an important member. She is also the director of *Kya Hua Is Shahar Ko? / What Has Happened to this City?* (1986), one of the

first Indian documentaries recording and analysing the rise of the Hindu nationalist movement. Her films have been shown extensively in India and internationally and Dhanraj has given numerous lectures on Human Rights issues and teaches filmmaking.

3)

Documentary Acts

By Madhusree Dutta

Madhusree Dutta is the co-founder and executive director of Majlis (together with Flavia Agnes), a centre for rights discourse and multi-disciplinary art initiatives in Mumbai. The centre is engaged in cultural literacy, contemporary practices of archiving, mobilising artists around political articulations, and in producing texts, plays, films and multidisciplinary art works. Dutta's documentary *Memories of Fear* (1995) responded to the challenges for both aspects of Majlis, the cultural and the legal. For the film Dutta created four fictional narratives which drew on stories of women who came to Majlis' legal centre for help. These narratives address early developments of fear, silence and morality codes concerning the female body within the family and the public sphere. These are set next to women giving testimonies in direct talking head style. While Dutta expanded a documentary repertoire by responding to her collaboration with the feminist lawyer Flavia Agnes, Agnes saw the film as a form of extending the concept of the testimony and supporting her practice of "fighting a legal case as more of an exercise in articulating and expanding certain notions of rights in practice and not really about winning a case". Dutta has since then continuously expanded feminist discourse to questions on citizenship, migration, urbanity and its many forms of exclusion and addressed these through probing documentary representations through the theatrical. How can these early productive ruptures between the cultural and the legal be thought of today? How to continue making political films when its testimony about structural violence fails in front of the law and in public discourse?

List of films:

I live in Behrampada (46 mins), 1993

Memories of Fear (57 mins.), 1995

7 Islands and a metro (100 mins.), 2006

Project Cinema City: Research Art and Documentary Practice (multiple installations, books, films and presentations), 2008-2013

Biography:

Madhusree Dutta lives and works in Mumbai. She studied at Jadavpur University, Kolkata and at the National School of Drama, New Delhi and is now a filmmaker, a curator and pedagogue. Dutta is interested in the spatial and cultural labyrinths of the urban milieu, in migration and movement surfacing through various fluid cultural notes - railways as a metaphor for those conjunctions; the feminisation process of the urban poor, communalisation of identities, classification of resources and all contemporary forms to represent that status quo. Filmmaking, theatre, visual arts, text productions; the students' movement, feminist movement, movement against communalism, movement for the

democratisation of art practices; cultural literacy, art pedagogy; interfaces between genres, movements and disciplines form the trajectories of Madhusree's journey. Retrospectives of her works were held in NGBK art gallery, Berlin in 2001; International women's film festival, Trivandrum in 2005, Feminnale, Koln in 2006, Madurai Short Film Festival in 2007 and Persistent Resistance Film Festival, New Delhi in 2008.

Biography Convenor:

Nicole Wolf lives and works in London. She is a lecturer in Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths (London). She is also a film curator and has recently edited a DVD presenting the restored version of Deepa Dhanraj's *Kya Hua is Shaher Ko* (1986). Her academic and cultural work concentrates on international histories of political film practice and its relation to conflict, with a particular interest in South-Asia. Recent publications: "I am the very beautiful city. Conversations with Bombay, documented". In: Bhaumik, Dutta & Shivkumar (eds.) *Cinema City*. Tulika Press. 2013. "Projecting Tambaku Chaakila Oob Ali. Reflections towards a versatile archive of political cinemas", in: Raqs Media Collective and Shveta Sarda (eds), *sarai-Reader 09: Projections*. sarai, 2013. Her monograph *Documentary politics and feminist thought in India* is in preparation.