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SHILPA GUPTA

DRAWING IN THE DARK

ENGLISH

The exhibition *Drawing in the Dark* by Indian artist Shilpa Gupta brings together a series of clandestine stories and personal experiences from borderlands. The show is part of Gupta's ongoing investigation into interrelations between structures, specifically those of the state and the individual, and their rescaling as encountered at what is both frontier and periphery. Building on Gupta's six years of research – specifically in the borderlands of India and Bangladesh – this new series of works is an extension of the *My East is Your West* project she developed for the 2015 Venice Biennale. In late 2016 Gupta returned to parts around the border fence that India is building, encircling its neighbor Bangladesh, and that is notorious for being the world's longest separation barrier under construction between two nation states.

It is the metaphor of the line or threshold that links the works on display. We cross the walking, singing, drawing, writing and sometimes hesitating lines that thread their ways through the gallery rooms. *1:444557* is an impossible attempt at relating to the scale of the barrier between India and Bangladesh. The metal rod divides the antechamber. In the central dome room, *24:00:01* poses questions on identity, fear, religion, and that which remains ineffable. Phrases and sounds fade in and out. Two clacking riverbed rocks set the rhythm for a song. A hand-drawn map represents the subjective outlines of a country. A traditional saree garment was torn in long shreds and wound up. Marijuana drawings and aerial photographs with spare motor parts portray that which plays out in the shadow of the visible. They are momentary recordings of an ongoing, informal stream of goods, people and desires. *Drawing in the Dark* carries narratives of unlisted journeys along meandering lines on a map. In this fringe area, seemingly rigorous regulations reveal themselves as being in constant flux and subject to debate.

The exhibition is a joint production by KIOSK, Bielefelder Kunstverein and Le centre d'art contemporain – la synagogue de Delme.

The motion flapboard *24:00:01* is presented courtesy of the artist and DVIR Gallery, Brussels. All other works, courtesy the artist and Galleria Continua, San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins / Habana.

KIOSK

On the occasion of the *My East is Your West* project, Lawrence Liang conducted the following conversation with Shilpa Gupta:

Blurred Lines

LL: As I shared earlier, a number of artistic works, the overall theme of this exhibition as well as the form it takes resonated strongly with intellectual and political concerns I have held for a number of years on questions surrounding the blurred lines between legality and illegality, and how certain figures of illegality such as ‘the pirate’ emerge — and the discursive role they play in legal fantasies of control and order.

In the course of our conversation, you mentioned that you were not too keen on invoking the phrases ‘smuggling’ or ‘smuggler’ in your account of this series *Untitled* (2013-15), and it might be interesting to begin from there. I can understand your discomfort at using a designation that is over-determined by its connotations of illegality and criminality, and as Toni Morrison has reminded us: “Definitions belong to the definer not the defined.” But perhaps if we think of smuggling less in terms of its legal status and frame it instead as a question of practices and as a form of embodied knowledge, it could still be useful to think of what it enables.

Irit Rogoff’s work on smuggling provocatively invites us to think of the act and the conceptual possibilities it offers to the art world. “Smugglers,” she suggests, enable us to think of “flights of knowledge, of materials, of visibility and of partiality all of whose dynamic movements are essential for the conceptualisation of new cultural practices.” The line of smuggling does not work to retrace the old lines of existing divisions – but glides along them. *My East is Your West* similarly glides between lines, identities, practices and knowledge, and I am wondering how you would respond to the naming of smuggling and the smuggler as a necessary figure in a work like this?

SG: Glad to initiate our conversation with these thoughts. In my practice, I’m constantly drawn to the notions of focal length, an unstable panorama and relationship to perception and construction of memory as well as knowledge — even that which is non-existent or partially imaginary. Therefore, definitions and imaginations of the State surface in this project, revealing the chasm between the State as an idea and the State as a real-life organization.

Going by my experience in the making of this work via interviews, informal negotiations and readings, traversing edges of a given system, definitions enter into a scenario of subterfuge and fill gaps between what can be narrated, is narrated, by whom, and what might then be recorded or not, to widen as well as narrow into unexpected forms. Entries are noted, dated, weighed, and several stay unregistered, not always unknowingly, while gestures are paraded.

It was in the context of a short introduction to the project that I hesitated on the use of the word ‘smuggling’. I preferred instead to allow the viewers to wade through the works in the exhibition and work out the lines and shadows between words and the flow of goods. Sometimes immediate descriptions can wash away complicated trajectories. In fact, halfway through the exhibition, the word ‘smuggler’ appears, as part of a text below a blurred scan from an official form reflecting on a transformation of status: ‘smuggler’ becomes a ‘trader’.

There seems to be an intrinsic contradiction in terms of what the State would like for itself as a representative entity and what its elected representatives aspire for themselves. Even the stakeholders of Statehood may have a greater alignment among themselves than to the State as a collective entity. The amount of informal trade flowing eastwards between the two nations entwined by the shifting chars and the Sundarbans stands three times higher than the sum of formal trade. The border is part of a larger zone or borderland that at once constructs and subverts the nation. While India is building what will upon completion be the world’s longest separation barrier between two nation states, daily life in the borderland belies state intentions and the flows of people and goods continue, prompted by historical and social affinities, geographical continuity and economic imperative. Mobility considered as an integral part of social lives rather than an exception. Since, as we know, the existence of mobile communities has preceded the formation of states.

The work looks at the persistence of systems and their straddling across maps drawn on paper, which expanded distances, and the history of exchange flows across a multitude of material scenarios. The roving figure is held within a maze of events and personas, sometimes visible, at times in ambush and other times just strutting about. The figure is not necessarily solo and while it glides across *check nakas* (checkpoints), which may be the only architecture of formal exit and entry, where a country ends and begins, it imbibes personas and systems it rubs against. A customs officer candidly admitted that only as far as his own vision could travel, the area was under vigilance.

LL: All the materials that you use in the show are themselves 'contraband' items that do not disavow, but carry with them the traces of their legal histories. If commodities are marked by their primary status as objects of exchange value, and even if the idea of value is at the heart of the movement of people and things between India and Bangladesh, there is a way in which the social life of things, following Igor Kopytoof, is not exhausted by their career as commodities. They instead become cultural biographies of life and of movement. The spindle of muslin that lies corpse-like in a glass coffin is accompanied by a deceptive description ("Three hours and an overnight train: 300 to the dalal, 200 to customs") but far from being dead labour, this is a living, moving thing inviting us to partake of its biographical profile.

The deliberate choice to bring the contraband into the art space, makes me wonder what happens to the check posts at these border crossings: when the contraband becomes an art object, what gets transformed, and how does it in turn transform the art space?

Moving on to the next theme, the show is marked by criss-crossing lines (whether in the performance piece involving the cloth, or the maps made in the dark), so I would like to ask you a question about lines. Amitav Ghosh's book *The Shadow Lines*, which also deals with the India-Bangladesh border, shows us how fictitious, arbitrary and violent borders are. My favourite segment in the book involves the protagonist drawing imaginary circles on his copy of Bartholomew's atlas, producing enchanted zones of affinities, in which "Chiang Mai in Thailand was much nearer Calcutta than Delhi is; that Chengdu in China is nearer than Srinagar is". It is perhaps telling that even today when someone asks you in Bangla: "Des Kothay?", it is not your country or your nationality that they are enquiring after, but your village or your town.

While we have so easily accepted as natural these shadow lines and even natural barriers, such as rivers, mountains and deserts, there is a way in which lines as they function across your recent work provide an unnatural history of borders. The long lit-up lines being constructed on the India-Bangladesh border are only intelligible from an aerial god-like perspective on the world and in the show these lines become rendered on carbon paper almost like constellations of stars – those ancient guides which facilitated, not inhibited travel. And, what is it that walking, weaving, observing, storytelling, singing, drawing and writing have in common? The answer is that they all proceed along lines. It would be good to hear more from you on how you think art and lines can unnaturalize borders.

SG: Two images come to mind — firstly, of hundreds of cows grazing just a short walk from the zero line. This, just a few minutes' drive from the Tin Bigha corridor, where I was rather sternly told by the uniformed guard that only thirty cows are allowed to pass on only two days of the week into the regulated space of border *haats*.

And secondly, the image of an expansive sand terrain in Jamil Ahmad's *The Wandering Falcon*, where cattle herders, family and stock are on the move from the Afghan mountains in winter to the plains of Pakistan in summer.

To quote from the interactive sound installation, *Speaking Wall*:

"Is the place you come from
The place you were born
Or the place you grew up
Or the place you inhabit

Virtually
Mentally
Philosophically
Physically”

The text appears in a sequence, on the wall-mounted LCD screen, in front of which the viewer walks upon hand-sized bricks, forward and backwards, again and again, unable to see any line on the floor. Bricks used to build a wall.

Or in other instances, a flag made of human garments is held against the sky, a thread wound over, again and again in an impossible attempt to measure a fence, a mountain of all the stars of all the flags of the world, recognized and unrecognized – the materiality of an object, the durational act of its construction interacts with its embodied histories. Other recurring motifs include scanners, flap boards, labels dipped in acid to be etched, announcing systems such as microphones, employed to inscribe, to regulate a voice on behalf of and for a dominion.

The oldest nation is barely a few hundred years old and histories, habits are hard to give up, creating an impasse with *check nakas* and such symbols, as it becomes hard to guard a terrain of desires and sometimes desperation. Fear then becomes a useful tool, a psychological barrier, in the face of the submergence of the actual. As Willem van Schendel has written, “State regulations turn borderland societies into landscapes of control and fear without necessarily achieving its goal of blocking illegal entry.”

The plaque of the work *1:14.9* reads “1188.5 Miles of Fenced Border – West, North-West”. And as the work travels to different venues, the geographic coordinates shift, and thus circumscribe the location as suspect.

The looking glass metaphor is of immense interest, as in the world of art, which is about representation, it is precisely the act of representation that interests me. From here, we might imagine contrabands slipping into a cosmos and context, in disguise, and often reframing their disguise.

From Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*, the character which stayed with me the most is the aging and alert grandmother, who laments the death of a past she was part of, and was forced to leave behind, as she can no longer create the imaginary “upside down house on the other side of the wall, where they started their meal with sweets and ended with dal, slept under their beds, wrote with umbrellas and went walking with pencils”. What is loved and unattainable, declared strange.

A hundred hand-drawn maps of a country, traced over each other, again and again, and none of them match.

LL: And finally, I would like to ask you about light — the question of light and shadows permeates the show, constantly reflecting and with aspects of visibility and invisibility constantly refracted to us via the simultaneous existence of spotlights and fog. I am curious about your ways of working out the formal logic of how to use light and shadow in your work in a manner that would do justice to the complex interplay of the two in the world of borders. My specific curiosity about this arises from my interest in whether you experimented with formally converting the space into a liminal or threshold space. In anthropology, Victor Turner described the liminal as “Betwixt and Between” where he argued that attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (“threshold people”) create a space where the normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behaviour are undone. When thinking of the idea of light as a particular kind of threshold or liminal zone, we can think of the way that it enables a kind of passage from one world to another; for instance in cinema, with the screen acting as that which we are present to even as it is absent from us.

If the world of border crossings that you invite us to think with is one where people and goods cross, often in shadows, and the world of the museum is one which relies on lights and projectors to screen the world to us, how do these shadow objects relate to the new light that they are brought under?

SG: I am interested in the space between the falling of light on an object, the inverted image being registered and the making of meaning, its memory and recital.

In the second room, near the level of the floor, in a video projection, light passes through the prism, splits into several colours, a roving searchlight, a brief tear visible through a black canvas. No sound. A vitrine filled with fog with a text next to it, which reads, "You stand here and I will walk twenty steps away with this metal pipe and trigger; When it turns dark, we will not be able to see each other".

A man with a gun, perhaps in uniform, perhaps not, possibly connivance, alone on a large stretch of land, well aware of the approaching night, subsequently the fog settling in and resulting in zero visibility. Does the figure allow wilful passage knowing well that anything else might be futile?

In the exhibition space, the works from the series function as textual and experiential annotations to each other as they unfold one after another across the set of winding rooms. Ideas of visibility and invisibility constantly surface, as incognito objects traverse a meandering borderline drawn across a terrain joined by rice fields, communities, rivers and several streams.

While on one hand light pierces through a carbon drawing referring to the flood lighting under construction along with the border fencing, 'drawings made in the dark' refers to the clandestine routes, memorised, and made familiar across this intricately linked region.

A saree which has been shredded, fog that hinders vision, crushed bone china, a blinding beam, gold morphed into a fold of a garment that it traveled in, all obscured, lie in museum-type vitrines carrying narratives of unlisted flows.

A figure clutches a photograph, held up against his face as the claim to a piece of land is made, between invisibility and mobility, another has learnt to sleep every night in the glare of the searchlight. Edited registers of parliamentary debates make an appearance, the statement "Nothing will go on record" is announced to the room. There is little hope for a letter undelivered, which is ultimately found shredded. Witness in Denial.