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To Be Alive Means to Live in a World that Preceded One's Own Arrival and Will Survive One's Own Departure

Marcella Beccaria

Nalini Malani: The Rebellion of the Dead is a retrospective in two parts, held at the Centre Pompidou in 2017 and at Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea in 2018, which covers almost fifty years of this radical artist's career. Malani's engagement in the social arena has brought her to address today's violence and global injustice through a unique language. The following text is an edited version of the conversations that took place on the occasion of several meetings in Rivoli and Paris, where the exhibition at the Castello di Rivoli became the starting point for addressing some of the urgent social and political issues that are at the core of Malani's art.

Marcella Beccaria: This retrospective at the Centre Pompidou and Castello di Rivoli presents two specific selections of works, which complement each other. In both museums, the shared curatorial concept is that your politically engaged art right from the start has a deeply lens-based orientation. We see this in the early films from the period 1969–76, as well as in the development of your videos and video/shadow plays over the last three decades, but interestingly enough, also in your paintings of the last five decades. Now, finally facing the full body of work that, through Part I in Paris and Part II in Rivoli, is included in this major exhibition, I think it would be good to recall some of the key elements that guided the entire artistic and curatorial process.

Nalini Malani: I appreciate it very much that this retrospective is not conventionally static, but when it travelled it had the chance and capacity to change significantly. These changes depended on the history I have with the curators, the different political vantage points chosen, the specific architectural setting of both museums, and of course my works in their collection.

During the preparations of my participation in the group exhibition *Paris – Delhi – Bombay...* at the Centre Pompidou, the curator Sophie Duplaix showed a keen interest in my theatre plays from the nineties and their metamorphoses in the video/shadow plays of the twenty-first century. As such I became part of the *In Vivo* lecture series on Performance Art at the Centre Pompidou in 2013. The animated exchange of ideas led to the plan to develop the solo exhibition for the Centre Pompidou, that in fact became a retrospective, in which the performative aspect became the central element of the Paris presentation. This was experienced in the early films from 1969, my collaboration with the Japanese Butoh dancer Harada Nobuo, for the video play *Hamletmachine*, or the participatory element of the visitor in my video/shadow play *Remembering Mad Meg*, works which are part of their collections.

In Rivoli it felt natural to work with you, developing Part II of the retrospective, along the lines that we discussed with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and yourself for the exhibition that had been in the making since 2008. My exhibition history with Carolyn goes back to 2005, when we first met in Venice where I exhibited *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain*, the work she included in the first Turin Triennial called *T1: The Pantagruel Syndrome*, cocurated with Francesco

Bonami. In the Triennial I was the oldest artist among a group of seventy-five young ones. I asked Carolyn why this was the case, to which she answered that my art looked so young and crisp that it felt very contemporary. When invited for the Biennale of Sydney (2008) and also the dOCUMENTA (13) (2012), Carolyn literally took me through every space of each building. That is how I could arrive at works like *The Tables Have Turned* in the old round concrete bunker at Cockatoo Island, and *In Search of Vanished Blood* in the unusual last room with curved walls in the documenta-Halle. Architectural settings were so dominating that they created the feeling of a kind of ritual passage that enhanced the contents of my work.

Regarding the political aspect, I wholeheartedly agreed with the curator Sophie Duplaix to anchor the exhibition in Centre Pompidou to the still charged post '68 political environment of my Paris study/work period (1970–72). For Castello di Rivoli, as you know, the feminist revolt against the ongoing masculine suppression in the twenty-first century became the focus we agreed on. Undoubtedly, this is one of the key contents of *The Tables Have Turned*, the work we intentionally installed in the first room of the exhibition and that is also part of your collection.

MB: Let's talk about the way you worked with the architectural settings in Paris and in Rivoli in relation to your art.

NM: For me the setting has to be immersive, all-encompassing. In both cases the inner walls of the exhibition galleries were like the usual white cube, that I "attacked" by painting the majority of them black, grey, or ochre, to set the stage for my works which I see very much in the line of theatre. In both museums, the roofs and ceilings however are quite unique. The third floor of the Castello building, with its imposing dark brown roof and its massive chimney, is of a completely different character from the famous exposed skeleton of the bright coloured tube architecture of Rogers and Piano in Paris. Therefore in both cases I did not block the roof/ceiling, to allow a dialogue with the artworks presented.

As a result, in the video/shadow play *Remembering Mad Meg*, which was the central entrance axis of the exhibition in Paris, the massive machine-like dynamic ceiling pipes went straight through the medieval battle field of Mad Meg and became almost part of the artwork. While in Rivoli this wooden roof, if compared to the exhibition rooms on the other levels of the castle, with their vaults and frescos, feels like a gigantic upside down stranded wooden ship. A refuge for telling stories while waiting for the deluge to stop.

MB: In the retrospective as a whole, we can notice a number of recurring iconographic elements, as if some characters were travelling from one set of stories in Paris to the next one in Rivoli. Could you elaborate on this?

NM: In each museum we worked with its own unique selection of works, each containing a different complex network of related forms and ideas, which also connected to the other exhibition. For example, a skipping girl, as a beacon of hope, in the *Mutant* painting from 1996 exhibited in Paris, becomes a stop-motion animation projected high up in the "sky" on the chimney in Rivoli. Equally, the peeing man inspired by a Rembrandt drawing, as a deviant to the norm, has its place in the first shadow play *Alleyway, Lohar Chawl* (1991) shown in Paris, and as well as in one of the stop-motion animations of the six-channel video/shadow play *In Search of Vanished Blood* (2012) in Rivoli. Similarly, *Traces*, the wall drawing/erasure performance I made in Paris, forms a continuum to the one in Rivoli.

MB: For Castello di Rivoli the title you gave to your wall drawing/erasure performance is *City of Desires – Global Parasites*. I understand that *City of Desires* relates to the first of these ephemeral

projects that you made at Gallery Chemould in Bombay in 1992, while *Global Parasites* is a quote from the title of the book *Global Parasites: 500 Years of Western Culture* by Winin Pereira and Jeremy Seabrook, first published in 1995. Titles have always played a crucial role for you. It seems to me that they always offer an additional level of interpretation, working as a sort of continuous narrative that you resume from one work to the next. One day I would like to try to put all your titles one after the other. I think the result would be a very impressive poem. How did this combined title *City of Desires – Global Parasites* come about?

NM: In India, people from the hinterland come to the city to seek their fortune, to search for a livelihood when all else has failed. Another set of people comes because they find the city culturally liberating and stimulating. The metropolis itself provides ideas in its architecture, creating an ambience, in which its past is embedded in its contemporary setting. For example, Bombay could almost seem like a foreign city to a villager from a remote part of Maharashtra. In a famous Hindi film song of the sixties Bombay is endearingly addressed as “This is Bombay my love.” Rossellini used the score of the song for his documentary on Bombay.

It is believed that the city provides the potential for a better future. Now those dreams and feelings for the city changed over time, as I have experienced living there since 1952. In my recent wall drawing/erasure performances at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (2017), and at Centre Pompidou in Paris (2017), I therefore gave it a completely new dimension compared to my first works of this genre in 1992, which I continued in the one in Rivoli. In Bombay I feel that since the turn of the century a new phase of the city and its governance has begun. A totalitarian surveillance has taken over, where an orthodox religious nationalism goes hand in glove with monopoly capital and globalised industries. People become numbers that indicate who is to be part of that city and who is not. So the very city that provided a kind of idealistic motivation in the past is now fraught with fear; there is a complete segregation between the rich and the disadvantaged and dispossessed, but both are caught in a web, in which the word freedom has no more meaning than an advertisement slogan.

MB: How do you combine this harsh picture with *Global Parasites*, a visionary term that you came up with in the mid-nineties, which seems to be more accurate than ever before to speak about contemporary global economies?

NM: In 1994 Ms Vinita Mansata, the publisher of Earthcare books, gave me the book *Tending the Earth* by Winin Pereira, and asked if I would be interested in making the cover for his new book. Pereira, who was already unwell at that time, was a most unusual and inspiring person. He started out as a nuclear scientist, and eventually gave up his position to study environment issues holistically. The way Pereira connected things gave me a whole new insight compared to what I had studied in the sixties and seventies through Marxism, which leaned to the idea of how the working class could improve their lot through their collective force. Pereira argued convincingly how things in the last five hundred years had improved technologically, particularly in the West, yet there was a constant undertow – an erosion of the indigenous social order, culture, and proven sustainability that was above all wearing away the earth. The Western type of monopoly capital was inveigling its way into each government policy, where democracy became more and more strangulated. The labour force too is getting decimated by the new global order.

After reading *Tending the Earth* and the manuscript for the new book, this idea was getting attenuated by the dominating parasitic influence of capitalism. When I showed the artwork I had made for the cover of the new book, Pereira was taken by the title I had given it, *Global Parasites*; he found it apt and so it became the title of the book. And indeed, as it has turned out, global capitalism in the twenty-first century is the new master to be pleased; the new global parasites

“indoctrinate” us with consumerism as if these were the essentials we cannot do without while at the same time strangling us from within.

This title *Global Parasites* works for me as part of a set of key concepts around which I have developed my art over the decades. Other such concept titles are for instance *City of Desires*, *Mutants*, *Stories Retold*, *Splitting the Other*, *Cassandra*, and *In Search of Vanished Blood*. These concepts do not stand alone but overlap and influence each other. As such, combining *City of Desires* with *Global Parasites* in one title for this ephemeral work in Rivoli in 2018, is a natural trajectory of revisiting older concepts over time to bring forth a new idea. In the framework of a retrospective exhibition this element of revisiting is a given by its own nature.

MB: In this wall drawing in Rivoli you included one more artwork, namely the projection of your first 8 mm stop-motion animation film *Dream Houses* from 1969. This is an earlier version of the one shown at Centre Pompidou as part of the film diptych *Utopia* (1969–76). After you placed the video/shadow play *Transgressions* (2001–14) alongside the wall drawings *Medea as Mutant* (1996–2014), and *Free Trade* (1996–2014) as part of the retrospective at the KNMA in New Delhi, this is the second time you combine a major wall drawing with a projection. I personally consider this as a further step in your incessant research and experimentation with new meanings, conducted by juxtaposing contrasting ideas and media. Let’s go into the way the drawing and the stop-motion animation collate.

NM: *Dream Houses* was my very first visualisation of that dream for the city of Bombay, for its future. When it was shown at the MoMA in New York for the first time in 2016, the American art critic Roberta Smith described it as a “jewel-coloured abstract film”: this exactly expressed what I had in mind on the aspect of the attraction. The content of *Dream Houses* goes back to the socialist democratic Utopian dream of the sixties as we lived it in India under Nehru, where new forms of architecture and engineering would build a society with social housing for everybody. In those years, India was a close ally of the USSR, and after 300 years of colonisation there was euphoria for a modern new future. A dream that was soon shattered in the seventies, and to which I could not turn a blind eye like my friend Nasreen Mohamedi, who kept on making her modernist drawings as if nothing had changed. For me this decline in society was devastating. I developed a whole series of paintings of denuded raped female figures, where one can feel how the beaten injured body has become a metaphor of the disillusioned weaker section of society. In that period, I made the double film projection installation *Utopia* (1969–76) to address the same subject.

By incorporating *Dream Houses*, I projected this idealistic dream in colour on the right side, while on the left side, in the black and white film you see a young woman looking out of a window at the high rise amidst the slums, trying to come to terms with her disillusionment, knowing that this will never be hers. For too many a life of “dignity in poverty” was most difficult to sustain. This became my everyday environment when I had my studio in the wholesale markets of Lohar Chawl in Bombay. Even today, when Bombay is developing rows and rows of jewel-coloured glass skyscrapers, these “Dream Houses” have their dark side. As such I see a direct line between *Dream Houses* and *City of Desires*, where “Global Parasites” has become the new phase where India and indeed all of us worldwide, are in now.

MB: Your art is admired by a wide-ranging audience, and I know that you appreciate the readings of your works that come from academic scholars, as much as you like seeing the many selfies visitors post on Instagram, with the variety of individual shadow plays they perform in your immersive works. Can we talk about the role of the viewers in your work? It seems to me that, although you provide a very clear set of ideas and concepts, you also like to leave room for personal

interpretation. With their fluctuating forms, multiple points of view, ambiguous changes of scale, and references that cross Eastern and Western myths, you are definitely the author of a non-normative art, in which everything is in constant flux and open to interpretation.

NM: The artwork is like a gossamer thread of fleeting experience. This element one sees especially in my video/shadow plays with their rotating cylinders, where a slow procession of shadows and video images incessantly intermingle. The audience finally makes the work and gives it a new meaning. It is very personally selective and depends on what one holds on to. However, the experiences as such of each of these works still remain somewhere in a compendium of memory that we share in our cultural heritage and at some point the relevance of some elements rises to the surface. If you examine what becomes the important element that rises, you start to connect this with what is happening nowadays. That memory/recall helps you to structure your experience of the artwork in that contemporary moment.

MB: Almost reflecting an archaeological approach, layers seem to play a key role for you. It appears in these works as well as in your painting technique of working on transparent acrylic sheets that you paint on the reverse. As visitors, we enter these reflective surfaces, as Mieke Bal writes in her brilliant essay in this catalogue, where fluctuating images evoke a constant intermingling between the observed and the observer.

NM: As human beings we experience the world around us and try to understand or apprehend it. We try to retain it, to hold on to it, not simply as a fleeting memory but as a living thing. Observation as such is the highest point of retention, wherein the gathering leads to the stress of recall and the formulation of concepts. Then these concepts give us ideas with which we can move forward.

My method of working relates to the idea that we are living in layered worlds; living in layered Memory Time, where the montages of memory give new configurations and subsequential meanings. Over the decades as an artist I have developed a plethora of these memories. I key the material that I have in this, in order to question, form arguments, and even to make a manifestation. As such I see myself as an artist who is an architect of thoughts. To make ideas, that are visual/aural experiences, in which the visitor becomes part of this.

MB: Essential parts of these wall drawings are the erasure performances that follow and that you always indicate in the technical description of the work. With clinical precision, which makes me wonder if this should be traced back to your training in biology, you describe in the same sentence the process of making and destroying your artwork. Each time, your choice of erasure performance is completely different. In 1996, in Brisbane it was two dancers who performed the erasure. In 2010, in Lausanne the whole audience participated; while in 2014, in New Delhi, it was up to the security guards and in 2017, in Paris, you involved some of the same people of the museum who organised the exhibition, including the director Bernard Blistène. The performers change as do the tools they use: it can be a cleaning brush with a bucket of milk, pencil erasers, bare hands, even a bouquet of red roses, as happened in Paris. How do you see these erasure performances fitting in the wider range of your other artworks?

NM: It is another theatrical, ephemeral element in my art, where people who are directly or indirectly involved are taken into the process of the final state of the exhibition. In a world of materiality we too often do not *look* at things, forgetting that they are in fact evanescent, and will be gone in the next moment. An erasure, like passing time, has embedded in it a sense of loss, of death of that moment. But it resurrects in memory.

Another aspect that I want to negate is “market value” and bring back memory value. It started in the early nineties when the art world became more and more materialistic. At the same time India opened up its economy and when the orthodox religious groups started to get the upper hand, it put women and other targeted minorities in a most vulnerable position. The ephemeral wall drawing escapes value and you can’t put it into auction and tag it with a price. Its value is in the experience of seeing it, living it, and memorising it. This active process of memorising at its optimum form is the erasure performance where, just as with theatre, it lodges in your remembrance. Recollection gives it its value.

MB: In your experience, which kind of reactions can this process generate in the performers you involve?

NM: The reactions of the participants/performers have over the years been quite intriguing. In Lausanne the city architect who had reluctantly given me permission to make the wall drawing at their heritage museum, was visibly shocked when he was invited on the last day of the exhibition to erase that same drawing. Similarly, the security guards at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art in New Delhi, who for three months were under strict orders not to allow anybody to touch the charcoal wall drawings, were asked on the last day to erase this huge naked woman. And in Paris the director of Éditions Pompidou wrote to me: “The erasure of *Traces* has been an extraordinary moment... when only the eyes on the drawings remained, it seemed that the masculine faces had become feminine.” It is often that the performers come back to me to say that they experienced it as a magical moment. As such it functions as a metaphor for our fragile lives.

MB: Your resilient fight for a more progressive position for women has been embedded in your art for all your life, and I think it is very important in the context of this conversation to recall a few major events, also stressing the double role you had as an artist and as an active and daring organiser/curator. In 1978, you travelled to New York and visited A.I.R. Gallery. Meeting Nancy Spero, May Stevens and Ana Mendieta at this ground-breaking all-female artists gallery in the US inspired you to organise the first large-scale Indian women artists’ exhibition. A courageous undertaking that you started with the sculptor Pилоo Pochkhanawala, but one that was bound to fail in such a male-dominated milieu. It was only almost a decade later, with Arpita Singh’s idea to focus on four artists, that *Through the Looking Glass* became a series of now historical exhibitions that travelled all over India between 1987 and 1989.

More recently, in 2014, you called your solo exhibition in Bombay *WOMANTIME*, intentionally spelled in capitals, as a statement or possibly a scream. What do you exactly mean with the concept of WOMANTIME?

NM: It is not just WOMAN as such but I would describe it in a broader perspective as humanistic progress. When John Berger, with Jean Mohr, made the book *A Seventh Man*, first published in 1975, a new version of this could for me have the title *A Seventh Woman*. As Berger and Mohr also mention in the Note to the Reader, to write of women’s experience adequately would require a book in itself. Their publication was limited to the experience of the male migrant worker. The vulnerability of these migrant male workers in question, their humanly unworthy circumstances, and inner experiences, count as much for the other half of human society, WOMAN, even or maybe especially in the twenty-first century. It is most important in this escalating masculine period that we develop a sensitivity and conviction for this other – the female, the ecological sense of organising life – in which we know that everyone is connected and counts, and as such is also respected. These ideas about what I speak dovetail one into the other.

MB: Is there any hope to get to this WOMANTIME era?

NM: I am an artist, so what I can do is make art and as such I believe in the strength of progressive art and culture. When I was convinced about the necessity for this, I incorporated an Artaudian situation into my Brechtian ideas. Art had to go under the thick skin that we have developed. When *In Search of Vanished Blood* is shown, whether in Kassel, Boston, or Tokyo, it all too often happens that not only women but also men come to me with tears in their eyes, expressing their shared vulnerability with the raped female protagonist in the video/shadow play. In the confrontation of my art I am not a doomsday oracle, nor am I like what Heiner Müller famously once said: “I am neither a *dope* dealer nor a *hope* dealer.” But in the very negativism of my art there is, like in Müller’s, arguably both humanism and hope for the future.

Our twenty-first century revolution should have a profoundly feminine character. To overcome these dark times of orthodox masculine world dominance, we have to learn to listen to the women who lived before us. Can we redeem the *Rebellion of the Dead* through our commitment to a different way of life? Our feminine future is embedded in Hannah Arendt’s words:

To be alive means to live in a world that preceded one’s own arrival and will survive one’s own departure.