

JWTC

JOHANNESBURG WORKSHOP IN THEORY AND CRITICISM

The Salon

2014

Conversation between Lola MacDougall and Gauri Gill (The Birth Series, 2005)

A conversation between **Lola Mac Dougall** and photographer **Gauri Gill** that unveils not only work procedures, thoughts and experiences, but like her photographs, poetically reflects on the individual, intimacy, gender and location.











Interview with Gauri Gill

Lola Mac Dougall (Executive Editor, Punctum Magazine) speaking to Gauri Gill

The following are excerpts from an interview for JWTC where she talks to Lola Mac Dougall (photography researcher and co-founder of Punctum magazine) about developing her practice beyond a Euro-centric paradigm, about privacy and the multiple readings of her work, particularly the Birth Series (2005), reproduced herewith. Lola Mac Dougall (LMD): Your photography has often dealt with privacy. This requires a long-term investment in developing a relationship with your sitters, sometimes returning to them several times over many years. You have described your process elsewhere as 'active listening'. As a woman photographer, do you find it a contradiction that perhaps a relatively easier access to private spaces contrasts with the difficulties of practising other forms of photography, such as street photography?

Gauri Gill (GG): All of this is generalising isn't it. The act of photographing someone is about a relationship between particular individuals, so it is contingent upon those individuals...gender is one part of that equation. It is also context-specific. Certainly in some cities and neighbourhoods it is difficult to be out working in public spaces. I have been in a few hairy situations, where things unexpectedly turned, but then again perfectly safe in situations that one might consider to be definitely unsafe. As a woman who grew up in north India, to some degree we had to learn how to be in a public space...schooling oneself to dress in a certain way, being generally aware and so on. It becomes the DNA of who one is. Perhaps it is less true for young women today in post liberalised India.

There is also the issue of class. Although the street or the road is an equaliser in some sense, and perhaps confronts all women in a similar way, I might have a greater confidence based on my English speaking education and being relatively privileged at home. Perhaps its misplaced, but I might have ventured into spaces that another woman, with other life experiences, might not consider.

But yes, I have occasionally felt fear, and that is a part of it too. Then the camera gives you a certain power. When I am photographing I am absorbed and feel kind of invisible - although of course I'm not - but it has that talismanic power, maybe because one is so focused on the image making. I think people notice that, they can see that you're a little bit in your own world.

LMD: In this sense, some authors have pointed out that your series "Nizamuddin at Night" can be read as a feminist reappropriation of the public space (Sabeena Gadihoke 2010), would you agree?

GG: I was interested in the night and how my neighbourhood transformed itself at that time. It is true I didn't find many people out on the road in the middle of the night. The emptiness and darkness that drew me in felt preservative. The night is inward looking, in a way. Acting upon your desire, finding a way to do so - despite the fear - is feminist, I suppose

LMD: You have had a stint as a curator in *Transportraits, Women and Mobility in the City* (2010). In the curator's note, you wrote: "In the age of homogenising capital and markets; of art from nowhere, applicable to anywhere and frequently about nothing; it is a privilege to have had the opportunity to work with local groups and be thinking of local audiences" Were you only thinking on your capacity as a curator or also as a photographer?

GG: Both. I very much like to engage with local groups and show work where it is made...for me local groups may include friends and interlocutors. They are embedded in the work. It's such a privilege to be able to share work with local audiences.

LMD: So far, you have decided to stick to the representation of your own culture / country (even while living in the United States: "The Americans" is a series documenting the lives of Indian immigrants in the US). Do you agree that the universal can be achieved by looking at the local/particular?

GG: It makes sense doesn't it - since I have lived most of my life in India - to make work about aspects of being here. I did work on projects in the US that were non-India related, but they remained more at the level of sketches or explorations or research. I believe it takes a long time to become emotionally invested in a place, to truly care and belong - and have it belong to you.

And then, my culture or country as you put it, in the US was a different world altogether, and while some aspects felt familiar others were completely dissimilar to what I had known. It had transformed itself into another fantastic being. Culture is porous and not pristine. That's what made it interesting to me. And that's why it's called *The Americans* - because it really is questioning the notion of who is an authentic American. It's very hard to package individuals into one tidy package.

I think the universal is often achieved by looking at the local or the quotidian, things that are familiar and therefore not exotic, but never ordinary. The camera allows you to step back and see things, to slip through the cracks in a sense. I think digging deep is important, and your personal reasons for investing the energy and time and emotional resources into doing so - which won't ultimately sustain themselves if they're not real.

LMD: Have you ever surprised yourself approaching a subject with an 'orientalist' mindset? I guess as a photographer, one has to be alert not to fall into 'exoticism' traps?

GG: I think the main sign of an orientalist viewpoint to me is skimming but not really delving. If one starts to delve, one can't rely on the notion or stereotype anymore, and one can't predict what will happen: which way the work will turn, or how it will change you. I like to answer questions for myself, and if possible surprise myself. But yes, one can't help continually questioning oneself and one's motivations.

LMD: Do you feel your photography is influenced by the way you believe the West may read your work?

GG: Who specifically is the West? It's not a monolith, to essentialise it would be to Orientalise it no...there are all sorts of people working in the West, all sorts of work and arguments being made. That said, I do try and contextualise and frame the work when it is shown out of its local context, because it can be easily or lazily misread. Sometimes people visiting galleries in Delhi don't have the specific original context either.

My home is here in Delhi and so obviously this audience is and will always be very important to me. I do try and show my work in various places - including away from galleries and museums - from Urmul Setu in Lunkaransar to Mississauga Public Library - or most recently for free download on the internet. It's a freedom photography affords.

LMD: Let us focus now on Birth Series, a photo essay shot in 2005 in which an elderly midwife assists in the delivery of her own grandchild on a sandy floor of a desert hut in Rajasthan. Home deliveries represent 70% of the deliveries in rural India, the figure of the dai (midwife) being a central one in this event. According to the UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund), "midwives typically endure low status, poor pay and a lack of support despite the enormous responsibility they bear. (...) (They) often receive the least respect and support from the health system". I believe one of the reasons for my fascination with the series lies in its interpretative wealth. It can be approached from a variety of disciplines perspectives: documentary, public health, anthropological, etc. However, you chose to present it using what Elizabeth Edwards calls the romantic mode: in a dim-lit art-gallery room echoing the lighting in the hut where the delivery took place. As the author of the images, is there a particular perspective you would like to encourage/ talk about?

GG: The work does cut across a variety of disciplines because I am interested in different approaches. I have ongoing conversations with friends who may be activists, journalists, public health academics or economists. It's hard to separate the strains. Formally and contextually as well, the series can be shown in a variety of ways. It has been shown at a public health conference; it will be included in a book at some point. In the art gallery I like to show the eight works in the series in their own distinct space because they belong together and there is a kind of narrative, and the relatively low light is partly to try and recreate being there. Bright gallery lights are also to some degree unnatural. The 'facts' are present in the pictures, and may be read in various ways depending on the reader. But it's also true that finally there is a mystery, as anyone who has been present at a moment of birth - or death - can attest to.

LMD: If I am not wrong, Birth Series belongs to a broader body of work entitled Notes on the Desert. Talking about its protagonists, you once said: "To live out in the desert as a poor, landless person without a regular job amounts to an inescapable reliance on one's self, on each other and on nature". It is an all too common irony that a deficiency in infrastructure - health care in this particular case - has helped to preserve a traditional form of knowledge. How do you feel about this paradox?

GG: There can be no doubt that safe healthcare should be available to every human being, every citizen. It's criminal that it's not. Even in the case of this particular birth when the baby's head would not descend we had moments of real panic. I knew the nearest help would be five km away on a camel cart...and that would be just to get to the irregular bus. I felt helpless. So I immensely respect women such as Kasumbi Dai - and many of the dais I later met - who are very much needed by villagers in the absence of necessary and medical facilities, and who at least have a breadth of experience, if not the requisite medical training. They continue to do this work without adequate recompense. Because the reality is that existing hospitals are often too far away, poorly equipped and maintained, and missing gynaecologists, anaesthetists, oxygen and other emergency facilities that we consider basic and essential in the city. Both the journey to the hospital and the subsequent costs entailed are often economically not feasible. Hiring a vehicle - as well as paying for family members to accompany the mother, and food and lodging expenses for the time it may take - all of this can be prohibitive. The men of the house are not always available to accompany her, and families hesitate to send unaccompanied women. And both patients and families prefer 'lady' doctors, but not many women doctors are to be found in rural government hospitals.

But also, there is a fount of knowledge and experience that has been passed down over generations and is connected to the particular area - it's particular geography, weather conditions, food and herbs etc - whatever is easily available and suits local people. So although traditional medicines or cures cannot solve many things - and it would be foolish to depend on them wholly particularly where the mother is at any sort of risk - I do think they have an inherent value which should not be completely discarded. It may be more useful to acknowledge dais, learn from them and include them in the formal hospital system and government schemes. Many dais come from lower caste or tribal groups, are widows or economically disenfranchised, and this makes them susceptible to exploitation. There is a stigma currently attached to the dai, as though the services she provides are somehow illegal, when in fact it is one requested for by villagers, often understandably so.

In the end it's about absorbing both systems, and giving people real choices, isn't it? They can then decide what they want, for themselves. And to think a little practically, as women often must and do. Yes, for many, this is the tough reality. It is a paradox and a complex one.

LMD: The viewer is unable to see the veiled face of the mother-to-be but, at the same time, cannot avoid feeling that she is over-exposed: she is extremely vulnerable because she is in a transition status towards motherhood. What do you think the sitters themselves think of this exposure?

GG: It is a difficult and delicate time. And we were careful that her identity should not be exposed in any way. I wished to be as respectful as possible. It was completely private as there were only four of us women adults in the room, and a young niece, and Sooni's young son. I had a small inconspicuous camera without a flash and I wasn't really photographing throughout. I was pretty caught up in what was going on, even having to assist in the birth! Since I had lived with the family for ten odd days they knew me quite well. And they knew why I was there.

Interestingly, Kasumbi Dai told me once: "A jaapa (delivery in Hindi) at home is much better because the girl is covered with clothes. In hospital, the person is exposed, it's all open". There, all kinds of strangers have access to your body.

LMD: The photographer is a participant in an intimate moment. Did you feel you were participating in the event beyond its mere documentation? Do you feel this particular body of work reveals something about yourself?

GG: We had conversations over the time I was there. I learned so much from being with Kasumbi Dai, a real feminist to my mind, someone who had taken charge of her life and survived and steered it after suffering grave losses. Being there felt also like being in another time. We were fairly isolated, and I remember the quiet in the desert, other rhythms. I'm sure it does reveal things about myself - as with all of my work. But it's not really for me to say.

LMD: The series may be observed from a feminist perspective: it questions an ideology related to patriarchal structures according to which women should be annoyed with their own bodies. "Ladies" should repress and never mention (let alone display) bodily experiences that produce bodily fluids. Hence, menstruation, excrements, delivery related-excreta are considered obscene. In an etymological sense: "ob skena" referred in Greek theatre to bloody or sexual scenes, which were to be performed off stage.

It could be said therefore, that you are challenging the displeasure that women are expected to feel towards their own bodies. Are you comfortable with this political / feminist reading of the series?

GG: I think in the urban context there can be an attempt to fetishise the whole experience of childbirth, whereas here, in some ways, it felt like the most normal thing in the world. Afterwards Kasumbi and another relative took the umbilical cord and placenta out into the yard and buried it in the sand, and washed up, and there was a simplicity and ease about the ritual.

LMD: As a viewer, I cannot help being extremely aware of the sandy floor and the fact that most of the childbirth fluids will be absorbed by it. I personally find it a beautiful thought: the woman marks the land as some kind of a pointer of belonging. Did you ever consider the series in this light, I mean, delivery as a kind of mark in the Earth?

GG: The birth happened in the earth, quite literally. One of the things Kasumbi initially wanted to show me was a delivery on one of the plastic sheets she had been trained to use by the NGO. The birth started on a sheet, but very quickly Sooni (the mother) pushed it aside, and they made the traditional warm concave hollow in the sand for her to squat in. This was also how she had had her five children earlier.

LMD: One of the apparent readings of the series is the anthropological one, as it depicts childbirth, a quintessential rite of passage. By shooting the delivery, the photographer superimposes another layer of meaning to the photographic object. In your practice, what is the relation between the "moment of recognition" of the photographic object and its depiction?

GG: The moment of depiction as you put it, is really a moment of recognition - and everything that you have seen and done and read and felt in your life prior is responsible for it. So all of those possibilities and meanings exist in the representation or the photograph too. What comes after, and how the image is read in particular contexts, adds yet another layer.

LMD: Portraying privacy must be a difficult terrain from the ethical point of view. Talking about his 1970s' and 1980s' portraits of friends, Pablo Bartholomew says that he took permission from them before showing their images. But of course in this (his) case he could go back and ask them because they were friends, which is something that may just not be possible in many situations...What was your approach in the case of the "Birth Series", for instance? Could you elaborate on the issue of consent?

GG: I was invited by Kasumbi Dai to be there and to photograph the birth. She was proud of her work, and of the new and safe practices she had learned at NGO workshops and wished to show them to me, to record them. I could not have lived at her home for ten days without her consent or invitation.

As regards consent for Notes from the Desert and The Americans I showed the work to as many of the people I could reach, before both shows. Apart from the more straightforward issue of permission we spoke of the issue of what form the showing should take...and it's obviously useful and necessary for me to have the conversation about what the people in the photographs make of the photographs. Most other people don't even care as much about the particular image. It's a bit like looking at a family album with friends who lived the experience with you.

LMD: Some people feel that Mary Ellen Mark's work in India is exploitative, in the sense that she used India's incredible visual wealth and over-abundance of difficult situations. Do you think people would have been so harsh had she been an Indian photographer? In other words, should the 'voyeuristic sin' be frowned upon less when the photographer is an "insider"?

GG: Well, obviously I don't wish to comment on anyone else's work. But in general, whether or not voyeuristic sins are frowned upon less coming from insiders rather than outsiders, ultimately I don't think 'exploitative' work makes for very interesting photography. It becomes too one dimensional, too much about the photographer - easily contrived and flat. Photographs are transparent texts in a way. A lot is revealed in the image itself, to those who can read it.

LMD: In your experience, is there a rule to be followed in order to mark the limit between use and abuse of someone's image or this is something to be decided on a case-by-case basis?

GG: You can't be dishonest and take a picture for one reason which you state to the subject and then put it in another context altogether. But ultimately there's a grey zone, as with all relationships, so yes it is case by case. I think being honest about one's general intentions from the beginning to everyone involved is a good start.

With photography today, apart from the professionals there are people using cell phone cameras to record things all the time, and often placing images in different contexts without permission. And there is the State conducting its own surveillance... cameras are ubiquitous now. These issues are not restricted to the photographic form either.

You have this in other representations of 'reality' too - even those purported to be fictional novels. There are great writers who have written about their marriages breaking down, who reveal family histories and secrets, biographers who have used personal letters written by private individuals stored in archives... That's tricky terrain after all, which part of your experience belongs to you, and which to those who shared it - or do you have the right to share it because you have the language and hence the power. But again, I believe exploitation in intent and nature comes back to haunt the tone and tenor of the work itself. If work is deeply felt and observed, and made in a spirit of honesty and trust, it has its own integrity that others can share in.

Gauri Gill (Chandigarh, 1970) is one of India's most accomplished young photographers. She has developed her own personal aesthetic spanning a variety of photographic genres: documentary coexists with a fine-art approach giving space to the photographer's self-expression (a style that some have referred to as subjective photography); and always with a strong political undercurrent. This approach has earned her recognition at a global level: in 2011 she was awarded the Grange Prize for contemporary photography and she has been a Creative Arts Fellow at the Bellagio's Rockefeller Foundation in 2013.

Lola Mac Dougall has worked in cultural management in Brazil, Spain and India. She served as cultural adviser for the Embassy of Spain in India -developing publications like Vislumbres- and co-founded Punctum, a magazine devoted to the promotion of contemporary Asian photography.

<http://punctumasia.blogspot.in/>

<http://gaurigill.com/>

https://jwtc.org.za/volume_7/lola_macdougall.htm

All images by Gauri Gill