

Complex Seeing

Acts of Appearance, Gauri Gill

Text for *Maske*, Aargauer Kunsthaus, 2019
Hemant Sareen

In 2015, inspired by their famous papier-mâché masks, Gauri Gill reached out to Adivasi artists from the Konkana tribe in Maharashtra's Jawhar with a proposal to collaborate that was akin to an invitation to play. The entire community comes together every year for the local Bahoda festival when they don masks representing Hindu deities to perform scenes from the Hindu epics inflected with tribal myths. Gill suggested that for a change the artists create masks to reflect their contemporary situation and that the masks express basic human emotions, or *rasas*, as detailed in the ancient Indian dramaturgical tradition, and include animals and birds the tribe was familiar with, or even objects that are ascribed with sentience, like a home computer or a mobile phone. The interpretation of this brief was left to largely to the imagination of the mask makers Subash and Bhagwan Dharma Kadu, sons of a legendary mask maker, working in concert with their families and the larger clan. In a series of colour photographs, *Acts of Appearance* captures this Freudian childlike rearrangement of the world, appertaining more to the civic domain than to the fantastical, by a community and their collaborator together animated in play.

The mask makers together with other members of the village volunteered to act out everyday scenes, scripted and improvised by the 'actors' themselves, as masked tableaux vivants staged against familiar backdrops of their village and landscape. Some of the masks portraying human faces seem remnants of the archetypal 'face writ large' that the mask generally denotes in the Indian dramaturgical tradition in contrast to the Western theatrical tradition's mind-body duality of the face and the mask.¹ Bathos comes from the mismatch of registers: the unblinking icons performing daily chores.² The variety of masks on display vies for the vibrant abberant plurality of what has been desacralised and playfully assist in creating protean hybrid identities that resist easy classification and control: a girl-rabbit squats in a tent, a woman-cobra lounges on a couch, man-parakeet and man-owl go for a walk, a man-lizard and a man-fish gape out of a window, a boy-mobile phone poses for the camera, a boy-television turns his back on a television, man-sun and man-moon walk down the unfinished road, a grocer-cobra weighs onion on the scales. The masks aid sardonic depiction of a way of life far removed from the vanished

¹ 'In Search of A New Theatre,' Girish Karnard, in *Contemporary Indian Tradition: Voices on Culture, Nature, and the Challenge of Change*, Edited by Carla M. Borden, Smithsonian Institution, 1989, page 103

² In Classical Sanskrit, a classification of beings places gods and fish in the class of non-blinking beings, the *animisa*. Norman Brown, Editor Rosane Rocher, *India and Indology: Selected Articles* by Norman Brown, Motilal Banarsidass, 1978, page 85

'happy life,' a "sufficient life" beyond the control of sovereignty,³ that the tribes knew before losing much of their control over land, forests, and water resources – memorialised in the masks depicting birds, animals, the sun, and the moon – to the state-facilitated rapacious neoliberal development. The masks retrieved from the realm of the sacred back to the secular world and brought into free use, become a sign of protest for an egalitarian society and social justice.

What emerges from this ludic mobilisation – there lingers in the word 'mask' a whiff of the Arabic word 'maskhara' or 'jester' – in the masked charade, is the reclamation of their faces and their representation by the community as it participates in the larky problematisation of their representation by inducing a Brechtian 'complex seeing' into it. The making and wearing of masks is play that begins with profanation and belongs squarely in the realm of the political. Play abolishes myth, that is kept alive through ritual, and its burden of history, and makes the calendar superfluous.⁴ It is through play that photographer's ethics of engagement and the photographer's civic imperative of enlarging the citizenry of photography are held in fine balance.

³ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis/London, page 113

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, In *Playland: Reflections on History and Play*, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, Verso, 1978, page 78