

11.02.2017 - 16.04.2017

SHILPA GUPTA

DRAWING IN THE DARK

The Art of Subterfuge: Slipping Past Borders

Nancy Adajania

A smooth, dark mild-steel bar slices the air diagonally. You have to dip your head ever so slightly to pass through. Shilpa Gupta often phrases her works as obstacles, riddles or occlusions. You find yourself adjusting your vision, rewiring your viewing reflexes to experience her work. *Drawing in the Dark* is an assemblage of found objects, remnants, traces and tremors that the artist has picked up from her extensive research on the Bangladesh-India border – the fifth-longest land border in the world.

*He got down to work, to the task of settling the fate
Of millions. The maps at his disposal were out of date
And the Census Returns almost certainly incorrect,
But there was no time to check them, no time to inspect
Contested areas. The weather was frightfully hot,
And a bout of dysentery kept them constantly on the trot,
But in seven weeks it was done, the frontiers decided,
A continent for better or worse divided. [1]*

In 'Partition' (1966), W H Auden sketched a chilling portrait of the British barrister Cyril Radcliffe, who drew the ill-fated line that created the warring nations of India and Pakistan in 1947 and displaced millions of people on both sides of an unprecedented border. Seven decades later, the borderland dividing India and East Pakistan – which has been Bangladesh since 1971 – remains a fiercely contested site. The borderland inhabitants living in the *chitmahals* or enclaves along the Bangladesh-India border – a circumstance that renders them exceptionally vulnerable, as citizens of one country surrounded completely by another country – are stigmatized, treated as criminals and misrepresented as smugglers. In previous exhibitions [2], Gupta has offered a poignant reflection on the predicament of these citizens of nowhere, who are forced to camouflage their identity to gain access to education, health and civic infrastructure. [3]

Scholars Itty Abraham and Willem van Schendel have questioned the binary forms of thinking and governance that privilege State-authorized activities such as trade and migration as licit, while stigmatizing the clandestine actions of borderland inhabitants engaged in smuggling as illicit. They urge us to see the licit and illicit aspects of life in the borderlands as part of the same spectrum of activities. They argue, from an anarchist position, that "historically the boundary of illicitness has shifted back and forth as bandits helped make states and states made bandits." [4]

Gupta astutely inquires: "When does a smuggler become a trader?" Her question, as well as Abraham and Schandel's tantalizing folding of the bandit and the State into each other's narrative, can be validated by a historical example closer home. I am reminded here of the

KIOSK

exploits of the Belgian industrial spy Lieven Bauwens (1769-1822). Bauwens dramatically transformed Ghent's flagging fortunes in the late 18th century by smuggling blueprints of the recently invented spinning mule from England across the water; his introduction of the stolen machine gave the local textile industry a tremendous fillip.

Gupta's exploration of the slippage between licit and illicit, clandestine and official, heartland and borderland, led her to stage a mysterious event where large photographs of the motionless sky suddenly erupt with a scattering of automobile spare parts. A brisk trade in spare parts abetted by the spirit of *jugaad*, the practice of fixing problems with ingenious and sometimes counterintuitive improvisatory techniques, continues quietly at the border with the complicity of State actors. When these spare parts begin to levitate in the vast open sky, we are filled with intimations of infinity, a cosmic epiphany that cannot be patrolled by either State across the border.

But is this a liminal moment or a portent of greater surveillance? With rapid militarization, the sky has been reduced to so much airspace, mapped by the flight paths of planes and drones. The explosion of the motor spare parts in the sky heralds a new narrative of revelation, one in which maimed angels must tread carefully.

The art of camouflage and subterfuge that defines the existence of the borderland inhabitants finds an echo, here, in a series of ephemeral drawings that seem to disappear even as we are looking at them. These liquefied images, with tiny specks of the marijuana bark floating in them, half-reveal a boundary pillar or a walkie-talkie or the silhouette of a soldier. Carrying the traces of profit, pleasure and addiction – these crops are grown in proximity to the check-post area under the nose of the border security forces – the marijuana drawings hint at an elsewhere, are fluid and uncontrolled like the riverine topography that both States hope to conquer and control.

Can we draw a border in the water? Borders are always porous. The more sensors, lasers and floodlights that are deployed, the more vulnerable borders are to subversion. The silence of the marijuana drawings is counteracted by the drum-roll of Gupta's flapboard, which punctuates the plaintive semantics of 'breaking': "A part of me wants to break me, wants to break away from me." As the words break apart, syllable partitioned from syllable, our increasingly surveilled planet begins to mirror an absurdist play in which Pozzo is Lucky and Lucky Pozzo. The State cannot live, cannot even be stably and securely defined without its border; the border is just an imaginary line without the magniloquent territorial obsessions of the State to give it substance.

The percussive rhythm of the flapboard shadows the song of the stones. Picked up from the border area, like the bar resembling the mild steel of the border-fence, these stones are made to strike rhythmically in unison by a mechanical device. Is this the artist's prayer for a reconciliation between State and borderland, a one-hand-clapping Zen koan that reminds us that it takes one person to initiate change?

Territorially, a State is defined by its cartographic boundaries. But as we all know, a map is a fiction, a drawing about a piece of land that complicates its provenance by dreaming up more than one ending to its history. In an unpredictable move, Gupta gently bends the map of Belgium as if it were a toy wire. I would interpret this gesture as the scoring of a transcultural affinity across different histories of colonial experience. The former Third World countries are not the only transitional societies or states of emergency. While Belgium has tried to resolve its ethno-linguistic conflicts – as embodied by the rival Flemish and Walloon movements – to forge a unified national identity, the proponents of a partition of the country have become more vocal in recent years. The distorted map, whether of India or Belgium [5], tells us that nations are artificial constructs that often constrain rather than sustain; that enact repression rather than inspire free thought.

Notes

1. W H Auden, 'Partition', quoted in 'W H Auden's unsparing poem on the partition of India'. Retrieved from <https://scroll.in/article/674238/wh-audens-unsparing-poem-on-the-partition-of-india>
2. These earlier manifestations include The Dhaka Art Summit and the 8th Berlin Biennale (both 2014), and a solo exhibition at the Vadehra Art Gallery, Delhi (2016).
3. Since 2015, efforts have been made by both India and Bangladesh to de-enclave their borderlands. So far, 111 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves in India have been swapped. See Shamik Baig, 'The Indo-Bangla State of Mind', in *Live Mint* (11 July 2015).
4. Itty Abraham and Willem van Schendel, 'Introduction: The Making of Illicitness', in Schendel and Abraham eds., *Illicit Flows and Criminal Things: States, Borders, and the Other Side of Globalisation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005) p. 7.
5. As this show travels to Germany (Bielefelder Kunstverein) and to France (Le centre d'art contemporain – la synagogue de Delme.) later in the year, the corresponding maps of these countries will be used in the respective exhibitions.

Nancy Adajania is a cultural theorist, art critic and independent curator based in India.

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.