Organic dreams of Electric Sheep: Image, Empathy and Pulse

(After Philip K Dick)

Concept Note

Exhibiting the works of Baiju Parthan, Pooja Iranna, Mithu Sen and Gigi Scaria, the exhibit, 'Organic dreams of electric sheep: Image, Empathy and Pulse: After Philip K Dick', seeks to weave together an accumulation of questions that are indicated by the transference of images across the forms of photography and video; the implications of such transference on the image or images that make this journey, the subtle and perhaps meta changes that this journey results in for the language of images, as well as the role of the image in language formation and the ethical impulses of images so traveled that distance and reiteration begets the question of our relation to images as 'electric sheep', i.e. as fabrications with conditionality. The exhibits asks in effect; if we are implicated in the predominance of the image in our language, and thus also in the consequent separation, fabrication, presentation and animation of images, then what ethical considerations arise when distance mitigates the relations between image as experiential and image as construct and lastly what is the agency of the artistic within the formation of 'electric sheep'?

Empathy and Image

The philosophic and aesthetic discussions of empathy dating from the translation of the term "Einfuhlung" from its German to its English, "empathy" by Edward Titchener in 1909, positioned empathy as an ability to feel into things; notably in aesthetics, into inanimate images. A central figure is Theodor Lipps (1851- 1914), who was responsible for placing empathy as the central ability through which we can examine our aesthetic responses. He likened empathy to the abilities of 'inner imitation' and suggested that 'empathizing is experiencing'. Lipps conceived the notion of empathy as,

'…*a psychological resonance phenomenon that is triggered in our perceptual encounter with external objects. More specifically, these resonance phenomena are triggering inner "processes" that give rise to experiences similar to ones that I have when I engage in various activities involving the movement of my body. Since my attention is perceptually focused on the external object, I experience them—or I automatically project my experiences—as being in the object. If those experiences are in some way apprehended in a positive manner and as being in some sense life affirming, I perceive the object as beautiful, otherwise as ugly*.'[i]

These experiences he qualifies as based in 'inner imitation' and therefore also as 'objectified self-enjoyment'. Lipps however, negated the conclusion on the basis of the 'inference from analogy'. This implied that the knowing of another's mind was in fact the projection of our own minds upon the perception of another. This negated to some extent the validity of 'inner imitation' theory of empathy.

Discovered in the 1980s, mirror neurons

'...play an important role in recognizing another person's emotional states and in understanding the goal-directedness of his behavior have been understood as providing empirical evidence for Lipps' idea of empathy as inner imitation. With the help of the term "mirror neuron," scientists refer to the fact that there is significant overlap between neural areas of excitation that underlie our observation of another person's action and areas that are stimulated when we execute the very same action. A similar overlap between neural areas of excitation has also been established for our recognition of another person's emotion based on his facial expression and our experiencing the emotion.'[ii]

In a recent Guggenheim symposium organized around the retrospective of the works of Rineke Dijkstra, titled *Empathy, Affect, and the Photographic Image,* JenniferBlessing (Senior Curator, Photography, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum) citesstudies in neuropsychology that concludethat our abilities to sense other people's emotions is based on expressions. This situates our reactions as empathic as based on the recognition of an expression, in effect in a given image. For Blessing, Lipps' description of our

'...empathetic response to image is a form of mirroring, which is compatible with recent psychological discourses about the brain which scientist refer to as 'mirror neurons' which refer to a biological response to emotional contagion.'[iii]

This expanded notion of empathy links its philosophic and aesthetic conditions to the responses incurred in its biological conditions, through mirror neurons. However, from both viewpoints empathy is linked to the form of 'other' as represented through embodiment, or by an image, and in some cases by sound. Can we then suppose that empathy depends first upon the recognition of the 'other' and is contingent upon, after recognition, the differences and similarities incurred by this recognition vs. avs. the perception of the self? If the 'other' is represented by the image then the 'other' is also placed in a subject/object dynamic, where perceiveddifferences and similarities act as the mediators through which the subject/object dynamic is recognized, and transgressed by the self. As this is contingent upon the projection of self onto the 'other' it is an unstable staging of boundaries. Empathy then is contingent on the real/illusionary aspects of the image, and the boundaries the image is staged upon. Empathy thus depends upon a form of embodiment, whether it is the embodiment of an image (in the form of photographs, or animals in the case of Dick's work), it necessarilytakes on a material form in its manifestation of the 'other'

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep

In suggesting empathy as experience Lipps supposes experience as subjective because the object of empathy is situated within a presence/absence dynamic where the object is denoted by its representation.

At the beginning of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep,* Philip K Dick stages empathy as prescribed experience, accessible only to humans, as an act that is the primary differentiating fact between humans and androids, and through the embodied experience of a fabricated illusion/image.

In the novel, published in 1968, the world as it exists in 2021, is a post-apocalyptic world in many ways; food substitutes, mood altering machines, a dust cover over Earth that blocks the sun, and an Earth devoid of most of

its human population, serves as the stage from which, the title question is asked. Rick Deckard, a bounty hunter in search of rogue Androids is also in search of the money to acquire a real animal vs. the electric sheep he currently possesses. An animal in this world serves the purpose of a social construct at the center of which is the required and prescribed empathy one must feel while taking care of one's organic animal, in order to fit into not only a human society defined by its possession and care of organic animals, but also defined and prescribed by a quasi-religion termed as Mercerism.

Within this world, Dick creates a framework of initial oppositions; human and android, special (mutated) humans and normal humans, religion as both an imposed construct as well as an prescribed construct and the social conditions organized around the idea of empathy as primarily a factor of differentiation and definition. These oppositions erode as each character actuates their initial impulses, and come into contact with each other. Most notable is the construct of a quasi-religion as it is posited here, where the idea of empathy is constructed to be an entry point into, as well as a central defining identity and *experience* that actuates the religion.

When we first meet John Isidore, a special category of human (Dick implies that he is not capable of higher thought functions), we find him shaving in his apartment in a block of deserted apartments. When he switches off his TV, he finds the resultant silence around him overwhelming and he turns to a '*black empathy box'*,

' *When he turned it on, the usual faint smell of negative ions surged from the power supply; he breathed in eagerly, already buoyed up. Then the cathode-ray tube glowed like an imitation, feeble TV image; a collage formed, made of apparently random colors, trails, and configurations which, until the handles were grasped, amounting to nothing. So, taking a deep breath to steady himself, he grasped the twin handles.'[iv]*

The use of illusion/image as an entry point into an embodiment is specific to the use of the black empathy box, Dick writes,

'*The visual image congealed; he saw at once a famous landscape, the old brown, barren ascent, with tufts of dried-out bonelike weeds poking slantedly into a dim and sunless sky. One single figure, more or less human in form, toiled its way up the hillside; an elderly man wearing a dull, featureless robe, covering as meager as if it had been snatched from the hostile emptiness of the sky. The man, Wilbur Mercer, plodded ahead, and, as he clutched the handles, John Isidore gradually experienced a waning of the living room in which he stood; the dilapidated furniture and walls ebbed out and he ceased to experience them at all. He found himself, instead, as always before, entering into the landscape of the drab hill, drab sky. And at the same time he no longer witnessed the climb of the elderly man, his own feet now scrapped, sought purchase, among the familiar loose stones; he felt the same old painful, irregular roughness beneath his feet and once again smelled the acrid haze of the sky not Earth's sky but that of some place alien, distant, and yet, by means of the empathy box, instantly available.'[v]*

Empathy signified in the novel, is firstly embodied in the relationship humans have with their organic animals, and secondly in the illusion manufactured and projected from the *empathy box*. Over the course of the novel the aforementioned embodiments of empathy are slowly decoupled from their 'other'. This is illustrated by two events. First, Deckard acquires an organic goat, which is killed by the android Rachel, and second when Deckard has a spiritual vision - he finds himself taking the well-worn path of Wilbur Mercer - without the

physical contact with a empathy box. These incidents decouple empathy from its embodiment in relation to the 'other', and instead situate it in the body of the subject. Rather than as an extension of the subject's empathy towards an object, Dick situates, at the end of the novel, empathy into the subject (Deckard, androids), as it relates to itself. When Deckard accepts a new electric toad as his animal, he reconditions his empathy to exist independent of the nature of the object towards which he steers it.

Dick decouples empathy from the aforementioned parameters by allowing for the transgression of these boundaries; when androids are discovered to have feeling of empathy towards each other (self) and towards the humans (other), this breaches self-other delineations. Later when Deckard experiences the same illusion that is prescribed by the empathy box, without the need for touching the empathy box, Dick suggests that embodied experience exists independently of the mediator (the empathy box) and in so doing further destabilizes the delineations between the real/illusionary where empathy as it relates to the veracity of an object (organic sheep vs. electric sheep) is negated by its situation into the self. This parallel staging of the instabilities inherent in empathy whether philosophic, aesthetic, neurological (organic vs. androids), self/other and image (real/illusion) in echoed in the works in this exhibition.

In examining Philip K Dick's novels, N. Katherine Hayles in her book, *How We became Posthuman*chapter seven, titled: *Turning Reality Inside Our and Right Side Out: Boundary Work In The Mid-Sixties Novels of Philip K Dick,* Hayles positions Dick as a transgressor of the android/human subject while transgressing the inside/outside status of the observer. Hayles writes,

'*In Do Androids Dream, a compelling "proof" of the official ideology that androids occupy a category ontologically distinct from that of human is the fact that androids cannot experience fusion with Mercer, a quasi-religious figure who appears when a human grips the handles of the empathy box. Androids, incapable of experiencing this fusion, are judged to be lacking in empathy, the touchstone of the "authentic " person. Do Androids Dream, shows the essential quality of the "human" shifting from rationality to feeling…For Dick the construction of the observer cannot be finally separated from the construction of reality."[vi]*

The artists whose works are exhibited herein, formulate and articulate this divide (between observer and observed), by allowing for shifts in image as it is seen, viewed, used and incorporated from their lens, while also questioning the lens through which this viewing, recording and acting occurs. These works are positioned as their 'electric sheep'; constituent as spaces and the process at which reflexivity occurs between the images, the prosthetics of the image (the artist, the recordings, and the recording of), and where the artist crosses the subjective viewpoint to meet the viewer as a staging ground for instabilities.

For Pooja Iranna the city is poised as other, for Mithu Sen, decay and the body of a bird is posited as other to herself and the ants that gather around its body, for Gigi Scaria the other is destabilized through the leveling of historical context, and for Baiju Parthan a fragmentation is created of the image through the breakdown of its elements and its consequent animation through the overlay of a Cartesian Grid. Each artist provides their own conception of the image as they instigate a transformation upon the image and its elements (contextual as well as temporal) and while the process of transformation also inhabits several distances, each artist through their

own reflexivity and refraction delineate, rework and muddy the boundaries of where empathy meets image, where image meets its form, and where image is viewed in regard to the frame of its making.

Conditionality

In the following sections of this essay, we will discuss the specific works in the exhibition, which requires a stating of conditionality. The artists herein, were asked to reframe a video still of their choice as a photographic image. While Pooja Iranna, Mithu Sen and Gigi Scaria extracted photographic images from their videos, Baiju Parthan chose to extract and animate three videos from three photographic images. Since this essay examines the works in the exhibition - which is composed of video and photography - it is important to mention that these works cannot be fully represented within the body of the text except as *representative*images of the works. This essay further destabilizes two sets of images (first, the image/images that are destabilized by the artists, and second, the set of images that are *used* here to stand in as a tool for the demonstration of the representations/interpretations evoked here – here they are neither photograph nor video, but in their *use* are designated as signifiers). This double destabilization of images between their textual interpretation and their transformation into text, necessarily destabilizes the *ontology* of these images, and thereby the presumed ontology of their interpretation. It creates a disembodiment, yet while it is being textually interpreted we find that we cannot disengage from the material form of the images. So while an embodiment in text takes place the absent embodiment in material concurrently forces itself upon the resultant textual interpretation, creating an additional signification through which these images travel. We further examine the positioning of empathy in relation to the destabilization that occurs as image couples and decouples with its embodiment in text, photography and video, and in a double reflexivity, we end by examining the textual representation of the exhibition as it is staged herein.

Textual Interpretations

Pooja Iranna

In Pooja Iranna's world of art, construction and textures play the most pivotal role, giving form and meaning to her creations; Iranna uses various types of media to create lattice like structures composed of lines and forms that intersect, unite and connect in what almost resembles an architectural blueprint. The grids she builds up over her surfaces are never the same; each one seems independent and different from the other. Through Pooja Iranna's works, we are taught that man-made structures and environments reveal a great deal about ourselves and the relationships we are entwined in. [vii]

Another New Beginning: Video

In this video, a tower extending into the bleak grey background, standing alone, starts slowly to bend: it morphs from a standing tower into a curved form, and when it finishes reordering its form, it starts to invert itself; it's twin rises from the depths (from under the present image see below). As a viewer, our eye constantly moves to the top of the tower, down its length, and through the center- the segments of to-be apartments, so that we can realign the shifting shape to what was a standing vertical tower only less than a moment before. This movement forces the viewer to look back and reorient, and readjust, while watching the present unfold. Pooja Iranna has previously written in relation to this video that it demonstrates,

'…how humans have reached the zenith of their creation, but still there is no end. This could be terrifying but also of great hope. We are capable of doing the unthinkable at any point'[viii]

What is striking about this statement and therefore the video is that, it is a mediation of - in addition to our zenith - of the transfer, and transformation of knowledge; from the zenith of megacities *and* the construction on a basic level of our habitats, the formalization of the zenith (literally and figuratively) of our constructions of living space, and the movement from there to the structure of a boat - which despite its biblical implications - implies in and of itself the ability to transverse the body of our present, and the body of our knowledge in order to expand, and confer movement of both the human collective body, as well as the dissipation and distribution of our body of knowledge through travel, mercantilism and trade; the video suggests a transfer and transformation of our physical spaces, our bodies, and our bodies of knowledge.

The work poses several questions; what is the role of architecture, as a formal language as well as breathing living and experienced space that is integral to Iranna's work? What is the artist's view, or definition of architecture in this sense? Is it proposed as a body of knowledge that is physically used, and physically integral to our existence, but also deeply embedded in applied aesthetics, not just related to the movement of bodies, collectively in a space, but also segmented theoretically and isolated physically from collective consciousness? To the viewer this video perhaps suggests a more abstract construct.

Firstly, as the building starts to warp (We should mention here, that the only reality interjected into this work is the sound of building construction that last only a few seconds into the video, which then morphs into the sound of what can be thought of as 'working water' not idle water) the background is purely grey, suggesting an isolation and abstraction of the tower, and its construction and warping.

Secondly, that the image of the tower at first is fixed, and when it warps and stops, and then moves, the remaining image at the bottom is a mirrored twin; in effect itself an abstraction of the first abstraction. Conceptually this mirrored twin also seems to be a combined rising of the ashes, as well as prodigal return of a buried other, which also implies that there is a theoretical 'other' to the zenith of human achievement. This mirrored other along with its lighter twin combine together to balance out, hinting at a leveling of perspective and a leveling of the self/other divide and upon this balancing act the 'boat' thus transformed, takes its leave.

Another New beginning: photograph

In the photograph derived from the video, we see that the chosen image (as shown above) is balanced perfectly, and is visually an illusion, as it is not only suggested as resting upon the base, but also suspended through the center, where image meets mirrored twin. Although this static image can be seen as a boat, it also suggests an archway, or a dangling toy, swinging to and fro. There is an aspect of stop and go that takes place in the video that does not take place in the photographic image, but which derives its quality of stillness and precarious balance from it. This stop go and effective segmenting of each change in the video is absent in the photograph, but instead a different sort of illusion takes its place. Because the balance in the photograph comes from the center and not actually from the base the image dangles, yet remains very solid and unmoving.

As the image creates an illusionary balance and as it dangles in open bleak grey space, it suggests precariousness framed in a solid unmoving photograph. The overt absence of human presence in the work of Pooja Iranna is nevertheless implicated by the constructions of human activity. In this, we are not quite present, but are undeniably implicated and embodied by the constructs inherent in her work. Within these frames – self and mirrored hidden other, human activity and its productions – provide a back-grounding to the constructions of illusions and a frame within which presence meets its representations.

Iranna has previously stated that one of the central elements of her work is the construction of spaces, mostly devoid of actual human presence, but not only affected by it, anchored by it (in the form of sound) but also resultant from the human activity. The artist views this element of her overall body of work as also the concurrent construction of a language devoid of overt human presence but implicated by it.

Mithu Sen

In her works, Mithu Sen contrasts scale, subject and even genre to give life to her remarkable imagination. Installations and paintings are an important part of Sen's oeuvre. She works spontaneously in both genres – one mark or symbol leading to another, with no preconceived narrative or definitive meaning; put down in the style

of free association, they consist of a peculiar collection of motifs that playfully subvert commonly held beliefs about femininity and sexuality. Juxtaposing intricate and large forms, conflating animals, humans and inanimate objects, and combining drawing, painting and collage, Sen's works provoke both humor and serious consideration on the part of the viewer.[ix]

Video: To Icarus: Who glued feathers onto his arms in an attempt to fly…

Opening with the cacophony of chirping birds, this video opens, literally at the end of life. The carcass of a small bird is animated by the army of ants that cover it, who moving with purpose, gather sustenance or simply wander across the body of this carcass in theirexploration. As the video continues a pathway, a flow emerges. The ants, unable to carry the carcass anywhere, invariably animate their treasure by moving the arms in a motion that mimics the movement of the arms whilst flying. This lends a tragic and ironic air to the flightless dead bird while the industrious ants seem all the more futile in their machinations.

The video serves as mediation on the nature and role of decay in the furtherance of the myths of existence and its afterlife. In this Sen not only captures this afterlife, but frames this in a form that presupposes a progression of time. It is a grueling yet evocative display, which evokes in quick progression a series of emotions that start from the recognition of the tragic and the poetic in the image, and end with the implication of frustration and indifference that comes from the act of viewing.

Sen situates this work as part of her Birds series of work, she says,

The human bodied 'Icarus' with wax wings, evokes the desire to fly, to escape Crete from the imprisonment of King Minos. I am referring to the mythology of Icarus as largely a metaphor of each individual's desire to reach the sun. Though warned by his father, Icarus dies a tragic death because he flies too close to the sun. I see

everyone in analienated society as "Icarus" of the myth. A loner who is struggling but in the constant struggle of reaching the top will burn his wings and will fall into the trap of death and decadence. Latin poets read the myth more philosophically, often linking Icarus analogically to artists. In the fifteenth century Ovid became a popular source for the myth when it was rediscovered and transformed, now with Icarus acting as a vehicle for heroic audacity and the poet's own aspirations. Fall of Icarus often-appearing myth as in the paintings of Old masters like Brugel, but here the death of Icarus is being celebrated. It's the story of the individual who aspired to fly high.

In lending myth to the fairly incongruous death of a bird Sen activates the subject/object dynamic by asking whether the viewer, and the recorder of this afterlife should and could form illusion, myth, narrative and distance between the fact of death and the aspiration of being. In this she echoes the function of narrative as Hayles does when she examines the subjectivity of literatureand the rationality of science, she writes,

'*The literary texts often reveal, as scientific work cannot, the complex cultural, social, and representational issuestied up with conceptual shifts and technological innovations. […] It is a way of understanding ourselves as embodied creatures living within and through embodied worlds and embodied words'[x]*

One might suggest here that the embodiment of the image of the body of a decaying bird serves then the same purpose as literature does; a system of signifiers that address us through images that we create and manufacture.

While the video lends an air of tragedy unfolding in its frame, the photographs in contrast lend the action an air of immutability. As these photographs are extracted from the video they position the angle of view as changeable from one photograph to the next. Taken as a whole they provide a progression that the animation unfolding in the video does not. In one photograph it becomes clearly visible that the ants have breached a layer in the body whereby one can immediately see past the surface skin to the flesh underneath, while in the last, Sen adds to the image by literally gluing feathers to the arms of the bird's carcass, in a final indictment of the longing to fly that so besieged Icarus.

It is a gesture of kindness, but it is also a cruel gesture; to return to the body an outward semblance of its original purpose while recording and being a witness to the passage of purpose from one agency (that of the bird) to the next set of agency (given by the ants). It is therefore also in accordance of the desire to witness combined with the frustration inherent in the act of being a witness; from the point of view of a witness an interpolation perhaps can exist only after this fact. Sen seems to imply that our agency as witnesses can only be mediated by the passage of our viewing. At the point at which indifference and/or frustration in the position of the viewer occurs, is the point at which viewing turns to action to project its desired purpose.

There is an underlying assumption; in recording and displaying the nature of a body as it takes another form - as it transforms its organic nature from one form to the next - the linearityof this sequence mirrors the assumption that impotence in acting after witness is not a matter of agency, but a prerequisite to the immutability of this transformation. Transformation is inevitable, but the act of witness and of acting after, is not. When Sen glues feathers on to the image of the bird, she attests to the imposition of a view after the fact, as well as the inherent imposition of a layer of distancing that stands in the final regard as a stand in for her artistic agency.

From this distance myth can be seen as *Myth*, as a dispensation from reality that allows in the artist as well as the viewer, a construction or construct through which not only can the body viewed be transformed, but so can the physicality of the body as it exists as myth. This staging is a foothold from which to contemplate the veracity of *Myth* as well as its refractive and reflexive functions, whilst recognizing that the foothold so gained is equally unstable in relation to our acknowledgement of *Myth* as metaphor.

Gigi Scaria

Gigi Scaria's work draws the viewer's attention towards the painful truths of migration and displacement. The issue of non-belonging and unsettlement reverberate between the walls on his canvas. "Gigi's particular position is to investigate how city structures, social constructs, and the view of location is translated in social prejudice and class attitude," says critic and curator Gayatri Sinha.

Political Realism (2009), Video:

As the video begins we see in the forefront, two brown identical doors inside the interior of a residence with marble covered floors. As the doors open simultaneously, with a groan and a creak – which as the video goes on become sonic markers of oncoming change in perspective - the first image is entirely congruent with a domestic scene. The inside partial view of two rooms, used as an anchorage of the subjective glance (a domestic embodiment of a home), within the duality of two doors mimicking the viewer's perspective – *this is a home* - and the lens of the artist – *this is home* - serve to set a first footing in the now, the present – we are looking at the inside of a home *now*. This lasts only as long as it takes for a crane to emerge from the right side, behind the windows of the room on the right and as it passes from beyond our view, outside the windows we see it emerge as the doors close and open once more, into the room itself, and is revealed to be a crane carrying the disembodied head of a sculpture of Stalin.

In speaking on walls, Scaria has previously written,

My project is based on the possible transformation one wall can have when it interacts with the outside world. Walls always block your vision. A transparency in terms of its physical entity could break through the territory. The wall generally has two possible dimensions .One is from the point of view of the territory it protects; the other is the territory it defends. There is a space in between the defensive and protected territory, which is the physical space of the wall. Is it possible to interact inside the wall without being part of these two territories? That means is it possible to live inside the wall space and being a mediator of both territories? Is it possible that a wall could breathe through its lungs?

In this work, the walls of each room, as well as the common wall that connects them is both opaque, as well as solid. In some instances, what happens in one does not take place in the other – when the back of Lenin's statue stands in one, in the next frame it stands in the other, and then collapses- while in another frame, Stalin's head rolls from one to the other in a single frame. It is easy to follow the inference and impact of ideology into the space provided here and thereby to also interpret the flexibility of the wall as the bleeding over of ideology from one context to the other.

But the implication of a porous wall extends to the lack of perspective provided, thereby making the wall entirely neutral and indifferent to the territories it delineates. However, a different interpretation allows for the wall to stand as an interpretation of the inside/outside dynamic. Where presence in one frame transitions through its intent to omnipresence, obsolesce and absence as it sees fit. The video continues to incorporate the fall of icons, ideology, and monuments that existed in the last century, and that also heralded the start of our current century as told and shown through the images that form this collectively archived history. The heads of the monuments of Stalin, Lenin, Saddam Hussain and the fall of the Twin Towers, in Manhattan (literally and figuratively) also of capitalism and post-Fordism and Neoliberalism, and finally by the train that passes through, on a raised train track through both rooms, the rise of a global south, and in particular the illusion of a rapidly growing global India is hinted at.

But perspective here also has an impact on ideology, or the passing and recording of history. It is particularly suggestive that this history is staged through iconography, but also through the objective/subjective lens provided by the home within which it is contained. This staging allows for the viewer, both, a subjective and objective view from the inside of a home and we are perhaps asked to consider how these images enter, impact and impede into our private domains, while at the same time we are asked to consider perhaps the larger impact of these events as it relates to a collective home. Reflexively, it hints at the idea of a collective home, as it is

represented by the images that we take in, whether by television, internet or other media images – a segment of unreality inundated by the real version of events as they are experienced through a mediator.

Scaria writes,

In the context of political realism we, especially the people from Kerala had religiously adopted communism as our mantra to live our life. The collapse of communism had a huge impact on us and the depression was in the air. The moral implication of using any image for creating a story, according to me lies in the manner in which you are mentally associated with it. In other words you empathize with that image in the first place therefore that contributes the experience you posses.

Scaria, seems to be implying that even though the archived images of history form a an objective view point in the past, they are presented here as unrolling in present time, it is then also highly subjective when situated in a subjective environment, yet in the form of established media images, and not experienced first hand. Our experience of this objective view is equally subjective in the viewing of it in a format that itself is a reiteration of the distance between subject and object. In addition the last image of a elevated train that rolls through both frames, resituates at the end the viewer in a frame that is undeniably both, a projection of aspiration as well as a reality that exists outside the windows of both rooms – in effect a presence that cannot be denied, and is not an illusion of history. He writes,

We are very much subject to our visual environment. But according to me the images do not stand by itself therefore cannot be dealt with as a separate entity. Visuals around us trigger our thought process and the thinking gives meaning to it. Experiences are not always first hand, especially in the case of history and social memory. For example, we have never experienced the holocaust, or the struggle of independence against British, but the images, stories and social memory constantly make us empathize. Our basic emotions like laughter, pain, depression and sadness are not distanced experiences when we experience it; no matter the trigger is an image, which has nothing to do with us it its first place.

However, perspective as situated in the video is an illusion, given by the absence of perspective within the frame of the video. We as viewers are presented with a flattened image, and thereby also a flattening of ideology of the images themselves. This is a particularly fascinating view because in denying the viewer perspective in the frame used, Scaria propagates a leveling of historical context, a passage of time that seems to happen despite the viewer or rather our view, as witnesses to the unfolding archive of history presented within the frame. Which begets the question, as viewers are we innocent of the responsibilities inherent in the viewing of this archive of history, or are we neutral to the passing rise and fall of regimes, ideology, and icons - as told by their images? If the passage of collectively accepted icons/images of history are to attest to the passage of human time, how are we - the viewers positioned without perspective - supposed to react, view, and determine our place in this passage? Is this outside the preview of the control of individuals - the answer is suggested here is affirmative – as political realism is, as the title suggests a perspective. If we are to be witnesses to the passage of the 'archives of history' as they are shown rather than experienced, then are we not also outside of this archive, and if so what is the agency of our consequent action, reaction or implicit neutrality?

In the photographs exhibited here, taken as static images from the video, each photograph exhibits a symmetry that in its video format is not afforded to the video. Even as the video is a flattened perspective, the photographs, because they are static, and do not travel in one instance from left to right, are indicative of a writing on the wall that is not open to doubts of its existence.

In the context of 'Political Realism' these photographs function as objective views. Seen as photographs the gaze has no uncertainty, and therefore there is less uncertainly about the solidity and perhaps also the veracity of the images within the frame, signifying the underlying assumption of truth as depicted by a photographic image. Scaria writes,

According to me reality itself is fabricated. You cannot make a sense of 'reality' by understanding it as natural. Reality gives a lot of undefined space in between. There is an ambiguity when we talk about truth in relation with reality. There is no ultimate truth and therefore we normally say, truth is relative when we have to define the nature of illusion and real. According to me the spectrum of 'true' and 'fictional' may not have a pure 'truth full beginning' and a complete "imaginary" ending.

This removal of the subjective gaze serves to delineate the viewer from the image within the frame. Where the doors functioned as a sort of welcoming gesture, here, as the image is static, the photographs presume the existence of the gaze, and serve instead, a complete image, a priori of itself, of sorts.

Baiju Parthan

In 1995, Parthan began to study computers, learning hardware engineering, building his own machine, and creating programs. "I didn't want to be afraid of technology," says Parthan. "The machine has become the

'Other' for humans, and it raises philosophical issues that we have to grapple with." Parthan is especially interested in the influence of technology on religious beliefs, the implications of genetic engineering, and the possibilities of post-humanism (i.e. the development of symbiotic relations between men and machines).[xi]

Photographs

The works of Baiju Parthan exhibited here require a clarification as to the process of their creation. Firstly, Baiju has taken as his source three static images (Shown below), as photographs, and unlike the other artists – who chose image stills from a video to display as photographs – Baiju has applied an animation grid and animation to the photographs, thereby creating an abstraction of these images. The images were shot with digital cameras, processed through tone mapping software to increase dynamic range (HDR image processing using Luminance-Open source program), the slicing of the still images into frames using the 2D grid was done with GIMP (GNU Image Manipulation Program- Open source program) and the sliced image sequence was then converted into video footage using Blender 3D (VFX and 3D game development platform- Open source program).

These three photographs are certainly rich in detail, and representative of the multitude of noise and happenings that occur in India, where there are no clear visible demarcations of space (between private and public), and where space is not so much as occupied as it is remodeled. While the black and white photographs are images of a street view, they are also of a congested space, with and without stillness; a continuous image as well as a contemplative image.

The latter is seen more in the third photograph, in the leaning attitude of the man sitting in what is the late morning light, and the placid environment of a railway station. (Note the use of descriptors). If we are to take Barthes on the photographic paradox, where he writes,

'What is the content of the photographic message? What does the photograph transmit? By definition, the scene itself, the literal reality. From the object to its image there is of course a reduction – in proportion, perspective, and color – but at no time is this reduction a transformation (in the mathematical sense of the term). In order to move from the reality to its photograph it is in no way necessary to divide up this reality into units and to constitute these units as signs, substantially different from the object they communicate; there is no necessity to set up a relay, that is to say a code, between the object and its image. (…) Thus can be seen the special status of the photographic image: it is a message without a code; from which proposition an important corollary must be immediately drawn: the photographic message is a continuous message.'[xii]

At first view the object of each photograph is also the content. A code is not readily available and does not provide a hint to the context of the image. As Parthan writes,

...I noticed that while looking/gazing through the camera, my tendency to look for metaphors gets completely suspended. The gaze tunneled through the elements of the camera lens has an incisive quality, as it marks and captures the extraneous detail that's lost in the regular gloss. It is as though I can look at the world around and apprehends it without the filtering mechanisms I habitually engage. The works in this show are about exploring this extraneous detail that is uncovered through the camera lens.

This suspension of metaphor allows the photograph to be an image without a code that attends to its viewing, and so the photographic image here becomes a photographic message that is continuous, in that uninterrupted by the vicissitudes of the process of transmitting and receiving. However, there is an inherent filtering which goes on a priori the presentation of the image in this form. Here Parthan has modified the image after it has been seen through the elements of the camera lens and the image that is presented in its final form exists with a distance that incorporates the incisive quality of a metaphor free gaze, as well as the distance accumulated in the transference of this gaze- from through the lens to the photographic format, without a removal of the extraneous detail but with a different definition of image itself. In this sense the photographic message here is not continuous, as it is contingent upon the viewers questioning of the lens through which it travels. Parthan writes,

The videos presented are more of a conceptual exercise where I have gone in the opposite direction in terms of methodology. Rather than extract a still from video, I am generating and streaming a video from a still image by slicing a static image into multiple frames using a Cartesian Grid and sequencing those details into a video stream -resulting in some very abstract video works.

It is particularly fascinating that Barthes suggests the term 'Transformation' in its mathematical sense, which when taken as a function is a mapping of a set of X upon another set or upon itself. As such a transformation as a function in mathematics is a transformation of space, or Euclidean space. A transformative function that implies that space (2d or 3d) is being changed by the change in the parameters it occupies, which requiresa map of this space. According to Barthes, the effectiveness of the transmission of a photographic message is contingent on the absence of the transformation in this sense of the image/object being presented; in effect the photographic image is leveled and is presented without a shift in perspective; In this case, which is contingent upon the context/positioning of the viewer's gaze as well as the artist's gaze. Since we have suggested this context and gaze are subject to the opaque nature of the transition and therefore translation of the image from the lens to its final presentation, translation itself as a function of transformation, implies that in a certain sense the image/object changes as the parameters change, and therefore so does the message.

But the transformation that occurs in the translation/transition of the image/object by way of the change in its parameters (a mapping of a Cartesian grid and its animation), strips one code of representation and therefore meaning, by excluding it while concurrently overlaying a meaning that comes from the changing parameters of the grid. So the image when it is used to create a video, in its video form is shorn of the original form/message (that of capturing extraneous detail), re-constituted in its most abstract form, that of its construct (as a mapping done by the Cartesian Grid) and remodeled (on the basis of an algorithm) and in this process becomes a process of relay, a presentation of the message by the presentation of the grid it occupies, and lastly a representation of space that remains open for a viewer to insert their gaze and their meaning while receiving an abstraction of previous meaning. A decoupling takes place; of the detail from its original content, of the salient message from its construct, of the position of the artist as from behind the lens, and of the viewer's gaze from the position of viewer to a receiver. In effect in the transition, transformation and translation of the image from a photographic medium to the medium of a video in this form, with its particular and specific cartography, serves to delineate space in such a way that the decoupling of the viewer's gaze becomes also in the abstraction of the image a further decoupling of a identifiable context. In viewing the videos there are of course details that are evident from a comparison of the photographic image, but that assumes that the viewer is making such a comparison. However, the images in the video are sufficiently shorn of context to serve as abstractions of the original. The comparison with the photographic image is in some sense inevitable.

Without a suspension of this comparison, the consequent transformation of meaning that occurs becomes somewhat less incisive. However, it comes to be an effective representation of the abstractions of images and their meanings as they travel from one form to another and therefore from within one viewer's gaze, this transformation forms a coagulant that places the viewer outside-as a viewer- the image itself (unlike a classical narrative form where the viewer inserts themselves), where this act of viewing first the photographic image, and then the images transformed through the video calls for a check and recheck, a reevaluation of and return to all previous *positions* occupied by the viewer.

Where, for example, Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz posit that spectators in classical narrative cinema are manipulated by the images and, deprived of the ability to critically contemplate the act of viewing confuse film illusion and reality, an abstraction of images in *this* form forces a viewer to examine their position from which the act of viewing takes place, by the act of repositioning the images as they exist in each medium. Therefore the *ontology* of the images becomes a tentative path for the *ontology* of the viewer in the act of

viewing to take shape however temporal and unstable that may be. In this case, since it is the photographic image that comes *before* the animated image, there also exists concurrently a map for the viewer that expects the video to come before which allows for the staging of the image by Parthan to be an inherently unstable. Not only is there an extreme disconnect between the image in the photographic form and the image transformed into the video form, there is also disconnect between the viewer's gaze as expected and as it readjusts. In this readjustment, if the viewer takes this route, he/she is in a state of an additional alienation, and asked consistently to reconfigure their position vis-à-vis the image as it transforms. This alienation, so experienced is then a stand in for the disjunction between image and position. From this alienated position, congruent with the abstracted images, does the viewer become aware of the distance inherent in their position? And if so, what would be the implication for a repositioning of the viewer as it relates to the content of the original image? Parthan writes,

Images are raw materials. And as they do not depict reality to begin with and are derived from radiated information from reality, all images are raw materials that can be mixed, multiplied, subtracted etc. to arrive at formulations that elicit the maximum ripples (empathy) and longevity as memory in the viewer's consciousness/subjectivity.

In addressing the content of the photographic image, the elements of the photographs do not welcome an empathy-laden reading, or a compassionate reading on part of the viewer. Since the photographic image represents all available detail as a matter of fact, there is also - given the flattening of perspective in the case of the black and white photographs- a less of questioning inherent in the photographic image. In this sense there is less of a space provided for a viewer to enter into the photographic image. But a viewer's gaze depends on relating identifiers as well as metaphors for our visual gaze to identify what we see with what we know, and in that sense, even devoid of perspective, there is a tendency on part of the viewer to perhaps see for example in the form of the little boy's figure, the word 'scurry', or the descriptor, 'in the late morning sun', or the visual noise implicit in the image of a street, and for further example, the visual illusion of forefront and background in the photographic image of the man on a motorcycle on the pavement vs. the man walking near a motorcycle in the same frame. Because as a viewer our first impulse, is to search for a depicter in an image, an identifier, our first impulse is therefore a comparison of an outside image with our inside image (concurrently along with its various components). Parthan suggests,

I think it is more or less like memory and remembering. Though it is assumed that memory is an exact or true representation of an event, we know that in the process of remembering memories get altered and fictionalized. As an artist I gauge an image for its ability or potential to create a ripple in my consciousness. In the current context I could classify that as empathy. So it does not matter whether it is fictionalized or true to begin with. Of course the added inference of distance could reduce the longevity as well as the intensity of the effect, but not much from the position of an artist.

In his essay, "Marks of Indifference": Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art (1995), Jeff Wall posits,

'*Photography cannot find alternatives to depiction, as could the other fine arts. It is in the physical nature of the medium to depict things. In order to participate in the kind of reflexivity made mandatory for modernist art,*

photography can put into play only its own necessary condition of being a depiction-which constitutes-an-object.'ˣⁱⁱⁱ

In further examination of Dan Graham's works, specifically *Homes for America (1966-1967),* Jeff Wall provides an example of the model of the evolution of the conceptual nature of photography *in conjunction* with an evaluation of *its position* (as starting with photojournalism) with regard to the presence of its original as well as with regard to the presence of its literature. He writes,

'*Here the photo-essay format so familiar to the history of photography has been meticulously replicated as a model of the institution of photojournalism. Like Walker Evans at Fortune, Graham writes the text and supplies the pictures to go along with it. […] The print and the original photos included in it, do not constitute an act or practice of reportage so much as a model of it. This model is a parody, a meticulous and detached imitation whose aim is to interrogate the legitimacy (and the processes of legitimating) of its original, and thereby (and only thereby) to legitimate itself as art. […] In initiating his project in photography in terms of a parodic model of the photo essay, Graham positions all his picture making as art in a very precise, yet very conditional sense. Each photograph may be- or must be considered as possibly being-no more than an illustration to an essay, and therefore not an autonomous work of art.'ˣⁱᵛ*

In a reversal of the aforementioned process (where a coupling between the image, text and whole essay takes place), in the process of animating a space that consists of the elements of a photographic image, Parthan reverses the presumed autonomy of the video format from the presumption of an originator, thereby allowing the photographic image to stand autonomously from the video. The image in this transition *loses* autonomy as it travels from the photographic medium to the medium of the video. However in this conceptualization of the transformation of the image, this video goes beyond photography, as a device of anti-depiction, echoing Theodore Adorno on aesthetics,

'*Aesthetics or what is left of it, seems to assume tacitly that the survival of art is unproblematic. Central for this kind of aesthetics therefore is the question of how art survives, not whether it will survive at all. This view has little credibility today. Aesthetics can no longer rely on art as a fact. If art is to remain faithful to its concept, it must pass over into anti-art, or it must develop a sense of self doubt which is born of the moral gap between its continued existence and mankind's catastrophes, past and future. […] At present time significant modern art is entirely unimportant in a society that only tolerates it. This situation affects art itself, causing it to bear the marks of indifference: there is the disturbing sense that this art might just as well be different or might not exist at all.'ˣᵛ*

and arrives then at the point at which, its visual language can be reconfigured, and where through its form, it provides for a distancing of perspective that is at the same time contentious and a signifier of what Francisco J. Ricardo writes as the primary prerogative of new media art,

'*Neither indexical, nor instrumental, nor of figuration, although assuming all of these directions, the digital work of art rather uses its anti-realist form as argument for metaphorically, for a way of thinking about post-industrial being in a relationship to persistent shifts and realignments, conceptually comparable to the way that contemporary art selects the signs implied by the materials and objects that it, too, exploits for that function.'ˣᵛⁱ*

Empathy and Image

 In the conditional staging of the image in these works, the artists in this exhibition stage conditionally the ontology of the viewer in accordance and in discordance with the ontology of the image. As these images transgress the real/illusion and metaphor/myth laden line, their consequent destabilizationdestabilizes in turn the viewer and begets the question; what is the nature of the fabrication of the position from which we view a distanced image of ourselves? Our mirrored twin evoked in Iranna's video perhaps sits hidden under this demarcation, and as it travels upwards it cedes its underground in search for a balancing act.

Staged as such empathy becomes contingent upon the environment it exists in, as well as our position vis-à-vis the image (a staging ground). But empathy is also, as Parthan writes,

An essential feature of human consciousness that facilitates or mediates social exchange may be... Probably that is what differentiates human intelligence from machine (android) intelligence. From my position we know and experience the world/environment/reality exclusively through imagery that is generated or crafted out of visual, auditory and olfactory information. From that position all imagery is real and any distance that one may attribute to an image is inferred with the help of additional information. Having said that I must add that images though are real, hold no equivalence to/with reality. And that makes all images though real in their potential to generate empathy, actually distant from reality.[...] I do not know whether we can pin moral sensibility and ethical drives to images. I would pin these drives and sensibilities to our notions of acquired or intuited ideas about the 'ultimate good'. In my universe all imagery is distanced as it is abstracted from the source- reality. As there is no way of knowing with absolute certainty what is real and what is not, the reality (truth value) of the image is in its potential to generate empathy or in its lack of generating something equivalent to empathy.

However the Stanford University, Encyclopedia of Philosophy situates empathy as,

'If mirror neurons are indeed the primary underlying causal mechanisms for cognitively *recognizing certain emotional states in others by looking at their facial expressions, then it is quite understandable how such an observation could also lead to the feeling of an emotion that is more congruent with the situation of the other; that is, to empathy in the affective sense.'[xvii]*

If empathy is both conditional and fixed it takes an important yet conditional position. As such we suggest that that alongside the underlying biological pulse of empathy, there is additionally a construct of empathy - given by the shifting veracity of the environment and by the construct of the frame from within which we view - from which we infer that empathy is perhaps required. As this positioning is inherently unstable, so then are our responses in these conditions. We would like to suggest that empathy in this conditional position is contingent upon the mediation of the images that are presented to us, whether deemed real or illusionary, the ability to transverse the subject/object, self/ other divide is furthermore a mediation that presumes a empathic responses rather than actualizes it. In this sense, empathy, image and the human collide with the real/illusionary make up of our outside, our notions of the other and the conditions of our environments.

Conclusion

The framework of this essay came about in effect after the fact of the exhibition of the works. In a sense this essay takes as its conditionality from the work of N. Katherine Hayles, in particular her definition of flickering signification,

'*Flickering signification extends the productive force of codes beyond the text to include the signifying processes by which technology produces text, as well as the interfaces that enmesh humans into integrated circuits*'[xviii]

She writes,

'*Different technologies of text production suggest different models of significations; changes in signification are linked with shifts in consumption; shifting patters of consumption initiate new experiences of embodiment; and embodied experience interacts with codes of representation to generate new kinds of textual worlds. In fact each category – production, signification, consumption, bodily experience, and representation - is in constant feedback and feedforward loops with the others*'[xix]

As we have mentioned previously, this textual representation of the works in the exhibition, that exists elsewhere spatially and in the form of information exists both within and without this essay, the representation itself, is subject then to those spatial dimensions and its conditions concurrently along with the conditions it creates for itself here. In staging the instabilities of empathy and its conditions (specifically through the work of Philip K. Dick) we start from textual representation and conditions of empathy as in the novel, and travel through the works of Pooja Iranna, Mithu Sen, Gigi Scaria and Baiju Parthan, into the instabilities of the image as it itself negotiates differences in medium resulting in a questioning of the demarcations of boundaries of subject/object, self/other and real/illusion. As we return to question the textual representation of this exhibition, we attempt a decoupling of the depiction and speculation of a textual representation from its 'other'.

Hayles concludes,

'*Information, like humanity, cannot exist apart from the embodiment that brings it into being as a material entity in the world; and embodiment is always instantiated, local, and specific.*'[xx]

We find that like Rick Deckard, that embodiment, in whatever form it must exist, must also represent a material condition. In Deckard's case an electric sheep comes to be just the same as an organic sheep because his empathy at the end exists in and of itself; that is the material condition of empathy that it must exist in *relation* to a signifier (be it electric or otherwise). In much the same way through the transformation of image from image, to animation, to text, we find that even though image and thereby text can be unconditionally changed, it cannot however, escape the materiality of its transformations.

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