

Reflections on Contemporary Art

MUSING THROUGH ART PRACTICE AND ARCHIVAL OBJECTS

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It is hard to elucidate how my audacious flight from the archives to art spaces began. It began, I suppose, at the threshold of some unfinished historical project. In 2004, for instance, I had found hundreds of glass-plate negatives in Calcutta, India.¹ The small, delicate and shining glass plates evoked much curiosity and excitement. I embarked on a project to retrieve what looked like fuzzy yet gleaming marks, created by the silver halide emulsions imprinted on glass. The project involved meticulous scanning, followed by cataloguing and extensive commentaries; and thus, I hoped to relocate the newly discovered 'lost' material within historical readings.²

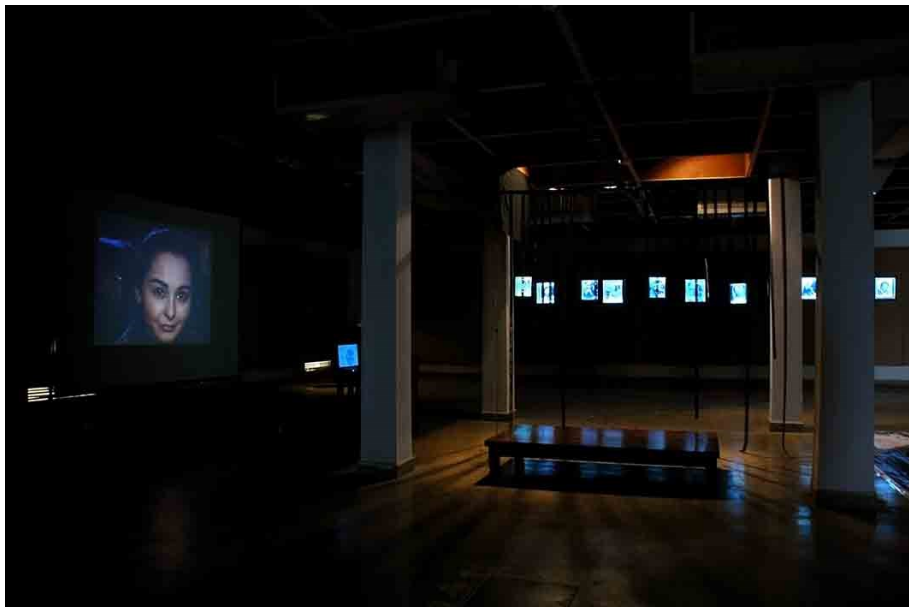
The material came forth as a bulk of publicity images used for theatrical projection; consequently, it set off critical queries regarding film industry, technology, aesthetics, cinema-halls and audiences. And yet, beyond such material there lay on my table a bunch of obscure images, which could not be studied in terms of date, place, author, etc. Some were in fact, devoured by the marks of time and had withered into nothingness. Indeed, a huge chunk of cinematic material, from some historical time, continues to persist outside the archives and purview of historical studies. And, then a face stared at me, and provoked me to reflect on material and method.





[Un-catalogued publicity material]

Following many deliberations eventually a solo media-installation emanated with all its ephemerality, which attempted to reimagine such opaque objects. It extended the material into abstract forms to produce an imaginary theatrical space and recall its (female) audiences. 'Theatres of Spectacle' (2011), was followed by 'Interiority' (2011) and 'Fragments of Cinema' (2012), which was held at *International Film Festival Rotterdam*. It presented art works (light boxes), videos and video-essays, which underscored subjects of cinematic spaces, gender as well as personal and public memory.

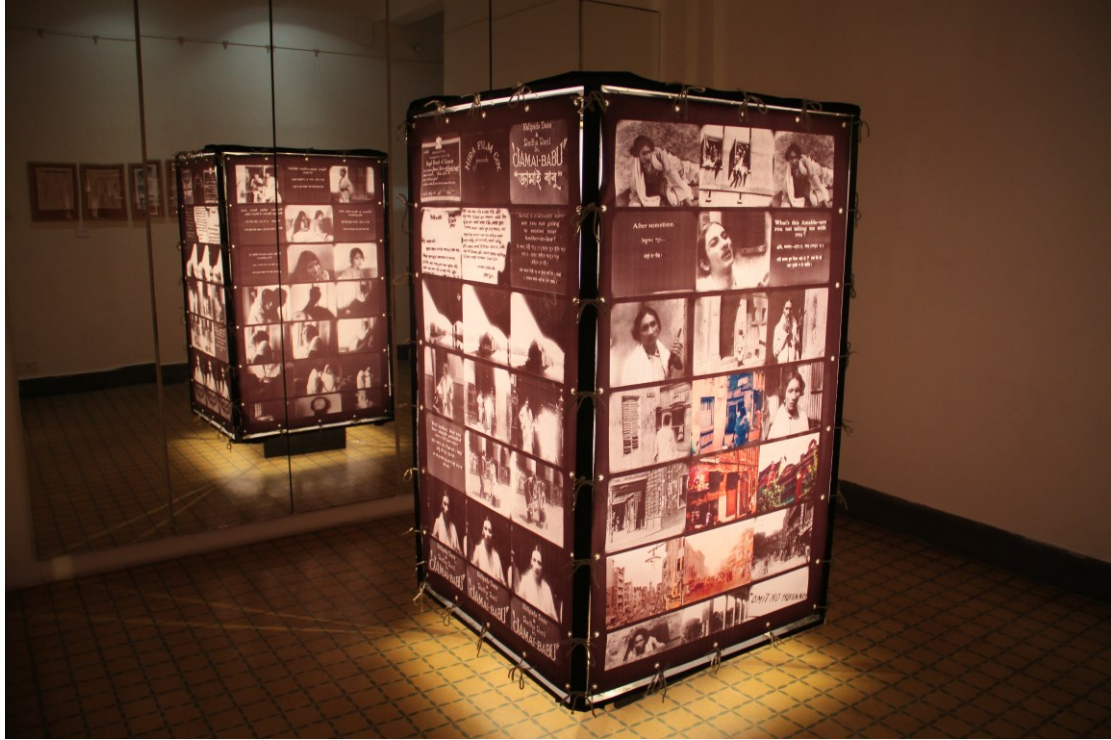


[‘Theatres of Spectacle’ at Nandan Gallery, Kala Bhavan, Biswa Bharati, 2011]

Perhaps, my involvement with cinema studies and unaccounted cinematic material found its own routes via such projects. In 2013, I did a large-scale solo show titled ‘Silent Forms’ at Studio 21, to rethink early trajectories of Indian cinema and reinvent the archives. It presented four discreet art works, created out of vinyl, wood, rope, glass, jute, bamboo, metal, and were titled ‘Fantasmatic Bodies’, ‘Toofan Mail’, ‘Jute Locks’ and ‘Enchanted Lamp’. These large objects were installed across four disparate zones. It also comprised digital prints,



archival images and writings, which were intercepted by multiple video projections, alongside a stop-motion animation.

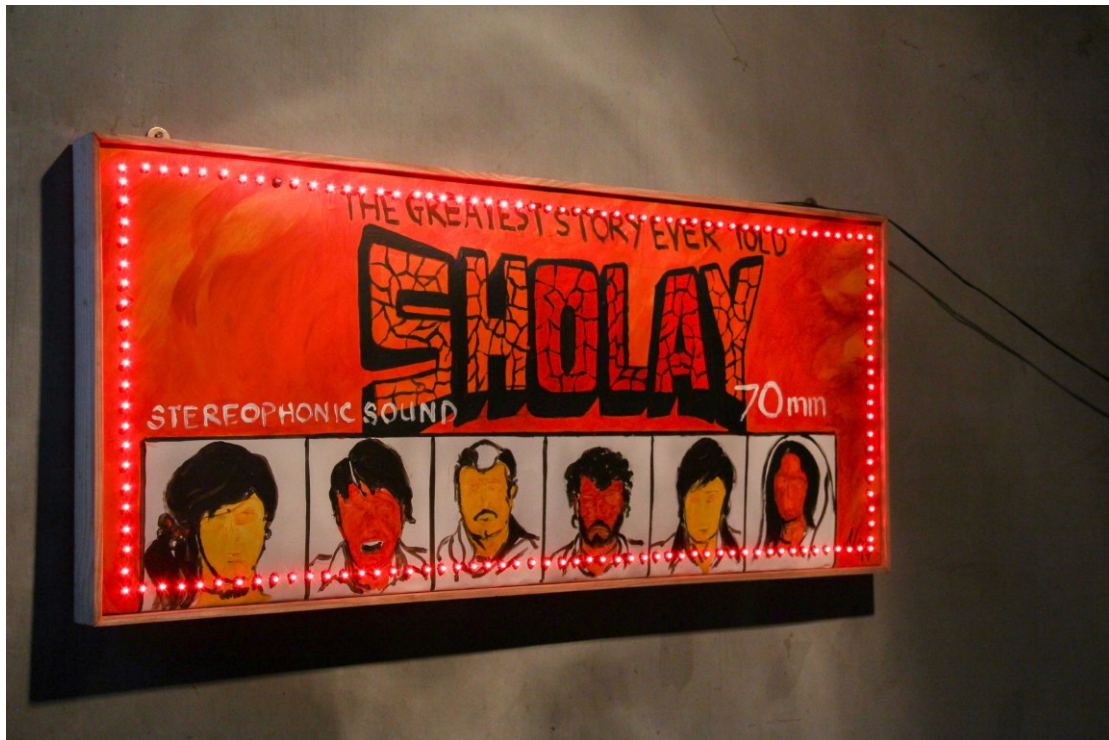


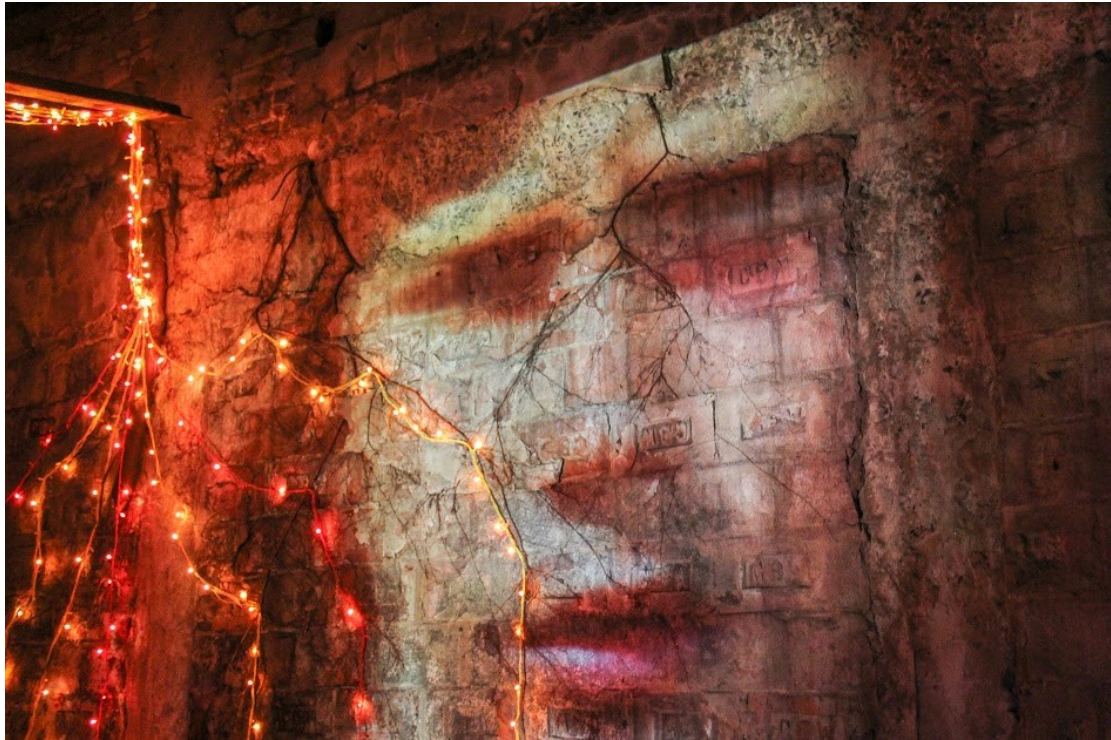
[The 'Enchanted Lamp' at Studio 21, 2013, which used frames from 'Jamai Babu' and recent photographs of the streets which he had traversed]

'Enchanted Lamp' for example, took frames of the film 'Jamai Babu' (1931), and via the film revisited the pathway of the 'Boka-Jamai' (foolish brother-in-law) who arrives at Sealdah station, like thousands of migrants, before and after partition -- to assess their kismet in the big city. The large lamp was an extension of my memories of looking at the slides of 'view-finder' , and also passages through the city.

I presume, one idea regenerated the other and such things, which in due course activated a series of other installations -- for insatnce, my site-specific work at GEM Cinema, Calcutta, during 2017-18. GEM cinema, Calcutta, set up in 1969, houses many public and intimate memories, narratives, and physical marks social history. Nevertheless, at the 'site' of this grand single-theatre, we encounter a hollow '70 mm' wall, while the rustle of dust and remnants of the seats, the wrecked lobbies, the shadowy projection room, cut-pieces of filmstrips, and stain

of fire on the walls, bring back whispers and cries of people, who sat through countless screenings of 'Sholay' (1975), 'The Burning Train' (1980), and many other 'silver jubilees'. My work (presented at the *Kolkata Arts Festival 2017*) was spread over three areas, and evoked such intimacies and urban-lore. 'TRAIL' (acrylic paint on metal), 'LADIES IN A BOX' (video & sound projected inside the 'Box'), and 'FIRE, MOVEMENT, ECHO', involving wood, metal, lights, video projection, conjured accounts of the film 'Sholay' and also the memory of fire in the theatre.





[TRAIL' exhibited at Gem stairway, and 'FIRE, MOVEMENT, ECHO' showed at the Balcony]

This was followed up through a collaborative project with CAMP, Mumbai (and Kenneth Cyrus), in 2018 during the *CIMA 25th Anniversary Show*.³ By setting up a camera on top of the cinema, and by recording ceaselessly over ten days, we aspired to reconstruct an immersive history of place and times. The site-specific installation worked upon Gem Cinema's location, which is like a hollow space inviting us to look at the city and across spaces. Situated at A J C Bose Road, GEM stands next to Entally Market and is close to Maulali (Maula Ali Dargah). It is placed at the crossroads of many lanes and bylanes, which was historically a Dalit and Muslim labourers neighbourhood, and the backyard of 'White Town/ Brown Town'. The hour-long live show (performed on 28th January 2018) and the video navigated 360 degrees of the cityscape, and reflected on the many histories beyond Lower Circular Road. However, what brought back many stories – including Jagdish Chandra Bose's science-fiction 'The Runway Cloud' – was the conflict between the intrusive eye of the camera and what remains concealed.



[From Gem we saw buildings located at Strand Raod, Chowringhee Road, Rafi Ahmed Kidwai Road]

En fin, a few questions which I have been asked before -- why and how does an academic or a filmmaker execute art-installations or acquire the sheer craft of it? Through continuous strife I suppose. Also, such efforts hope to bridge the gap between research and practice, and bring together many strands of history – the history of the city, cinema and its public cultures, which flow between arts and notebooks. Moreover, it rethinks the practice of site-specific installations by framing it with layers of historical evidences.

Acknowledgement: Antoreep Sengupta, Manas Acharya, Avik Mukhopadhyay

¹ Courtesy Sanjeet Chowdhury

² See Madhuja Mukherjee. Material, History, Arguments: Unidentified Publicity Images and Art Installations." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 15. 1(March 2014): 113-127.

³ <https://studio.camp/event.php?id=334>