A Tripod Made of Stone

An interview by Dr Shweta Kishore with CAMP's Shaina Anand and Ashok Sukumaran

Shweta
How do you define your media practice and how is it related to your artistic and professional backgrounds?

Shaina
CAMP came together in 2007. We all came from very distinct and diverse practices that were not necessarily within the ambit of 'Fine Arts'. Ashok had studied architecture and media arts, I'd studied film and history, and Sanjay—who co-founded CAMP with us—was involved in Indymedia and software programming.

When we set up CAMP, we made a statement of what it is we wanted CAMP to be. There was a conscious effort to not define ourselves as a 'collective', but rather to define ourselves as a set of conditions, materials and actions, 'to think and to build what is possible, equitable and interesting for the future'. As CAMP turns 17 this year, it's nice to look back and know that we stuck to our raison d'etre; studio.camp's 'about' webpage remains unchanged since it was published in 2007. We had been exposed to artist collectives and movements worldwide and had seen how collectives became fixed entities that were not so different from an individual artist—we were conscious of that because we had bigger ambitions.

Shweta
Can you talk more about CAMP's early approaches?

Ashok
We took a complicated route—trying to frame the relationship of early 21st century media to a specific situation. In an early project, I worked with electricians and street decorators in Bombay to create patterns of movement on the street—these professionals had highly evolved ways of accessing public space and using moving images and animation.

Shaina
I came to it with a clear critique of documentary film-making practices as they existed in the mid-90s in our region. Within the history of cinema and documentary film, there have been many moments where

images were ruptured, boldly assembled and materially tweaked. Everything passed through the strip of film and the world around it taken apart or critiqued.

In India in the early 2000s, the independent documentary filmmaking sector was significantly different to the decade prior. You could have your own camera, and your own editing machine! There was joy and liberation in owning a second-hand mini-dv camera, and in taking one's own images. But then I would sit back down and say, 'damn, I've thought so much about this, and I've also complained so much about what I can do to change the image. What is that missing image? Where can it come from? How can I expand the definition of cinema?' Those questions are what started my experimentation.

We were using the everyday technology to make our art. Those early protocamp [pre-CAMP] projects were electrical and distributive experiments. We worked with terrestrial networks—switches and hand cranks appeared on promenades and city-squares, where people could send lights and signals, share electricity. TV sets with CCTV grids, in neighbourhoods where people could performatively communicate, TV channels inside markets. Members of the public inside CCTV control rooms, or performing under city cameras. It was not very clear how to define it, but there are several ways to describe what we were doing: interventions, performances, dialogical art, interactive art, public art, happenings, new documentary, all of the above?

Shweta
Can you talk about your use of found footage and CCTV? It seems that your methodology not only involves creating artefacts, but also sourcing them. Tell us what your process of gathering materials and images looks like.

Ashok
The word 'found' is an uncomfortable word for us. We've always thought it strange because it reminded us of the art historical 'found object'. Our [method] is a very different thing, you're seeking it out. It is political.

Shaina
Building our own pop-up infrastructure for CCTV in Jerusalem in 2009 [for the work *The Neighbour Before the House*] was 100% guerrilla filmmaking; we did not seek permission to film from the Israeli state or city police. We did it all with a cheap CCTV camera and mic and with the support of a network of comrades and subjects. In this case, the subjects were the ones filming.

Ashok
The method is like a triangle. The subject is behind the camera. The camera is fixed to a building—as a friend described it, a tripod made of stone. The author is somewhere on the side, acting as a provoceur. We used this approach in 2021 in *Bombay Tilts Down* as well.

Shweta
Technology is often assumed to be transparent— the role of the camera for example, who has the power to operate it, or what its limits are and how that shapes what is filmed, is often concealed in the artefact. In the context of *Bombay Tilts Down*, the technology is not transparent. Did you want to speak to this aspect of technology in your work?

Ashok
The whole point is to show the non-transparency of media. When we make a work we use a device and method— sometimes we reveal that, so the audience knows they're not watching a [scripted] narrative. We allow this idea of "falling from the sky" to show the audience what generic CCTV cameras can do these days.

[Our camera] starts to scan or move on its own. The cameras become much more powerful. A 'patrolling' feature built into the surveillance mechanism allows viewers to explore the vertical landscape and its hierarchy within the city.

People who live in apartment blocks— even those in pretty bad condition—have a great interest in investing in CCTV equipment. These housing societies want CCTV because they want to see, they want to see each other and they want to keep an eye on things. It seems like they are willing to invest large amounts of money in this system, which ends up being used for all kinds of things—including to track people's children, spread stories and play out social rivalries. There is this fascination around it.

Shweta
Could you talk more about the location and the local histories that you were engaging with?

Shaina
The camera was mounted on a pole fixed to existing window-cleaning infrastructure atop a well-known hotel. Everything you see across the six screens is the west side view from Central Mumbai. You can see Hornby Vellard, a colonial-era causeway linking Worli to Bombay Island and Colaba, eventually uniting all seven estuarial 'islands' of Bombay. In the ocean is one-of-a-kind—and one of Bombay's oldest monuments—the 15th century Dargah of Haji Ali of Samarkand. This structure has its own legend—Haji Ali didn't want to plunder the earth and so requested not to be buried on land and instead be cast out at sea. The Hornby Vellard was built 250 years ago, and now the coastal road is being built on top of [it], literally swallowing the Haji Ali Dargah.

When the film starts, because of the camera's range you can see offshore oil rigs, and the Prongs lighthouse that's 15 kilometres away. You can also see the horizon of the open sea. You can see large shipping containers in the distance. You can see the trawlers and the larger fishing boats of certain influential Koli communities, but [also] the smaller ones in their *chappus* [row boats] with bag nets.

You can see the [construction] cranes, birds on thermals, the tall buildings, old wealth and new. You can sense the future as the storms come in. Then each screen zeros into a particular building and begins to drop and take a longitudinal scan of the environment until it reaches the ground some kilometres later. Several 'single shots', or 'long takes' were filmed from a single-point over many months. Distance is flattened as the camera goes down, creating that painting-like flatness. The shots very subtly dissolve and fade into footage from another time. It's like the images is being painted over with downward strokes. Like another day comes or another character appears.

Ashok
Cosmopolitan Bombay is being violently chopped up into these property lots, which are watched over by cameras. There is a level of everyday violence.

Shaina
That violence is structural. [As] Masao Adachi wrote about landscape theory, or what he called Fūkei-Ron: to understand power you must understand geography and the landscape.

Shweta
In *Bombay Tilts Down*, you use protest music and poetry that's closely connected to the history of Bombay and its working-class cultures. How does the audio fit with the visuals? A lot of alternate discourses around class and urban development are silenced. Is that something you were thinking about?

Shaina
We have two alternating soundtracks. There is an ambient, quieter one where the landscape speaks to you first. Then there's the airwaves one, where we're not saying whether the sound is emerging from down or up. It's travelling, "on air". A lot of [the recordings] are of dead poets, balladeers and dead singers whose voices were recorded. The work brings this archive alive.

That 'standing on the shoulders' and passing the baton that we do in our archival practice, is continuing in this soundtrack with the *lok shayars* [people's poets] and

singers and a new generation of artists like Bamboy, who did the music for our film. He grew up in Parel, near where the camera was positioned.

Shweta
How are you approaching spectatorship in the gallery, with the scale and architecture of the work? Is there a different experience compared to the cinema theatre?

Shaina
The audience needs at least three or four loops, to really get a sense of the details in the work.
Bombay Tilts Down is shown in such a wide accordion because it's composed of these longitudes stuck together. People watch one or two of the loops standing back and [are] overwhelmed by the scale and choreography of it as a landscape. But the folds break the panorama and the 'immersive experience'. The audience is invited closer—to watch a single screen or a diptych—and then move on to the lyric video and then get even closer to the screen. As one gets closer, more details become visible. It's as if each 'tilt down' is its own film with its own geographical narrative. What we're seeing are very dense and very loaded histories and this whole "whose land is it?" question underpins the work. The interesting question is is how deep the audience wants to go and what they want to take away. The community will see it one way, the city-goers another and the housing rights activists again differently. The work is undoubtedly monumental, but then you can flip it around and say it is similar to Arte Povera. It was just one CCTV camera on a roof. That's it. It was filmed pretty much without a budget during the pandemic by squatting on the roof of a hotel that boasts of its view. In that sense, it's extremely minimal, even though once it's set up, it looks like a big Isaac Julien type of production.

Shweta
We're talking about open archives as something that are not in the past or dead. I want to connect it with *A Photogenetic Line*. It makes visible other histories when images are detached from the logic of information.

How is *A Photogenetic Line* connected to your interest in animating archives?

Shaina
In many ways *A Photogenetic Line* draws from the archival websites Pad.ma and Indiancine.ma.[1]

Pad.ma features densely annotated listings that you can search and arrange by time code. These edits and affinities appear at first when you text search in the archive. Rules for montaging which evoke assemblage or montage theory or early AI, have been used in *A Photogenetic Line*.

Ashok
That line of images is a linear 100-minute or 10-minute film, where one image calls to the next. There are rules for ageing people and similar words in photo captions themselves: what the image says, what the photo caption says and what is happening to time within the image. Montage-like rules that connect one image to the other.

Shweta
Tell us about your experience as artists working from the global South, within contemporary moves to decolonise art institutions. Have you experienced a different approach towards art from the global South? Is there deeper critical engagement with this art?

Shaina
We chose to enter CCTV control rooms in the UK in 2008. This is a privilege given to us by way of art. For me this was a more generous gesture than making art from a brown colonial female subject position in a country that colonised my nation. Instead, the brown colonial female subject opens up the CCTV control room to members of the public. And similarly, I was privileged to be doing evening soirees in the markets of Senegal in 2008, with battery powered screenings discussing Mambety and Sembene and Raj Kapoor and *Amar Akbar Anthony* with the same passion. We also continued India's historic solidarity with Palestine, whilst filming there in 2009. And so is working with historic trade routes and sea-farers across the non-national western Indian ocean. This is an artist working from the global South.

Back home, India is like this big bully— and now an ultra-right-wing nationalist that is hostile to most of its neighbours. The art scenes of Colombo, Kathmandu and Dhaka are more welcoming and hospitable; there, for example, Pakistani artists can exhibit—that's not very possible in India at the moment. Currently, artists' roles in indigenous and decolonial discourse is problematic in India. Sometimes it feeds right-wing, ethnic purity, or ethno-nationalist and anti-immigrant discourse, as we can see with the National Register of Citizens in Assam.

Ashok
Globally, there's a lot more diversity in the arts, which is great and very necessary. There're a lot of new subjects, positions and specific lived histories. We need collaborative thinking, alliances and strategic solidarity because otherwise our ideologies get picked up in different ways by different powers. There's a lot of work tobe done.

The important work to do is to engage outside of the big buzzwords. We must develop our own forms of analysis and regional wins. It doesn't have to be bound to single artists. It's been interesting for us to look at the Indian Ocean, also Australia, via this collaboration here.

Working still: CCTV camera on the 35th floor of a building Bombay Tilts Down, 2021.

Biographies

Dr Shweta Kishore

Dr Shweta Kishore lectures in Screen and Media at RMIT University, Australia. She is the author of *Indian Documentary Film and Filmmakers: Independence in Practice* and has published widely on Indian documentary, documentary ethics, feminist film, and activist film festivals. Shweta is a documentary practitioner and has curated documentary and artist cinema programmes for the Kochi Muziris Biennale (India), The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre (Vietnam), and the Melbourne International Film Festival (Australia).

CAMP

Studio CAMP is a Mumbai-based collaborative founded in 2007, led by filmmaker and artist Shaina Anand, writer and software developer Sanjay Bhanger, and architect and media artist Ashok Sukwumaran. The collective creates acclaimed works across video, film, digital media, and public art forms.

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