

The Little Museum

Amar Kanwar

Before I begin I would like to show you a short film that I made about the Burmese student leader

Thet Win Aung. I think on this occasion, when we have come together to honour and remember the students and activists who were killed by the Mexican army in the Tlatelolco massacre, showing this film may be an appropriate way to begin.

Thet Win Aung was killed in a Burmese prison on the 16th of October 2006. He had been arrested in 1998 by the Burmese Military dictatorship and was serving a 59-year prison sentence for having taken part in organising student protests since 1988, when he was a high-school student. This film is about remembering Thet.

I would now like to begin my presentation entitled **The Little Museum**.

One day,
17 years ago
summer had ended
it was dark
they were all sitting
a few inside,
mostly on the road
in the centre on the tarmac
talking in whispers
gas lamps
the evening empty
unable to go home
as the night came
I realized
it was sinking in
that Niyogi had died
that he was no more
twenty years ago
Niyogi was the one who had made them come together
And now they had all come again
their leader had been
shot dead

in the dust of iron ore mines
in the evening haze of the Bhilai steel plant
and the trucks from the cement factories
is there any one with a camera who can come for a while
I had said yes
I can but
I had come too late
by a day or two
for they shot him yesterday
I realised that he knew that he would
be attacked
he had refused security
it was a mistake, he should have asked for protection
instead he had asked for a film maker
I filmed the funeral procession
the smoke from the pyre
the faces of the people
and now it was night
a night that I cannot forget
everyone refusing to leave
slowly the huddled groups grew louder
discussions retreated
voices become soft and intense
wait here – a worker said to me
no I said I will come with you
on his cycle
backseat with a camera
no light only a few lamps flickering all over
we raced from group to group
I rolled,
almost no image but clear sound
recorded on tape
the cycle wheels
the pedals
and the clear voice of the cadre
I still did not understand the tension
that spread silently
across the dark streets
when suddenly slogans ripped open the night sky
a hundred workers
appeared in a golden haze

The Little Museum

Amal Kumar

in the early hours of the morning
through the window
two men on a bike
slipped by and took his life
now this evening
they had cremated him
now
just a few hours ago
red and green powder flew in the air
slogans shook the buildings in the market place
people wept
stared in silence
averted their gaze
touched their lips
shut their eyes
looked up at the sky
at the ground
as his body rolled by the streets
ten, twenty, a hundred thousand
spread all over
and then suddenly it was dusk
it was over
time never stops, no matter what
I had come too late
late by a day
he had asked
two months ago
for a filmmaker
he had asked
is there any young person with a camera
who is free
who has time
who can understand
who can come and stay here
for a while
with us between the mines and the forests
amongst the workers and the peasants
alongside the forest dwellers and police
and the goons and the henchmen
beside the politicians and the bootleggers
the corporate advisers and the petty traders

torch lights
they were going to burn
down the city
we know who killed him they said
we will take justice ourselves they said
but Niyogi had put in place a string of leaders
he had left behind
one leader for every ten families
that's what the police and the industry wants
that's what they expect you to do
that's what they are waiting for
silently and fiercely this debate moved
like a river down the streets
in the little offices
through the dark huts
split the torch lights into two directions!
take them away from the city
for if you retaliate tonight
they will sweep the workers colonies
in one stroke
they will break us all down
my camera rolled
focused on a small yellow bulb
the only light amongst 50 men
insects whizzed around the hot glass curve
focus the filament
forget the grain
listen to the voices
keep rolling
this was no ordinary darkness
this was no ordinary bulb
this was no ordinary moment.

The moment passed in a while
it was strange
every one here was struggling
to deal with his death
but he of course had accepted it
for he knew he would be killed
as the audio tape he had recorded and
left behind revealed

Many years later
through the delusion of solitude
I did thank him
for calling for a film maker
to the scene of a crime to be.

Just last year, after a decade in court
they sentenced the hired assassin to life
he was also a poor man with gun
who fired
for a small sum of money
they acquitted those who hired him
they acquitted those responsible
for the conspiracy to murder

Again death beckons the artist
Death has many answers
Who killed him
Why did they want to consume
the forests and all that lay underneath
what was this greed that could drive
someone to kill.

“Drop falling in ocean everyone knows
Ocean falling in drop
A rare one knows”
Now listen the wandering poet shouted
“Who calls out your name
Is it life or is it death
Who calls out your name”

Recently I met a man
Nidhan was his name
Ni means without
Dhan means wealth
He lived in a village
that had been home to his ancestors for generations
streams sprouted all around from inside the soil
no one was obsessed with the origin of the source
the waters came from inside the hill

because the hills were special
Under his village lay 173 tonnes of bauxite
One day the democratic government of India
Sold all the hills to aluminium cartels across the world
I asked him, in the forest by the hill, under a tree,
on the grass, by the stream, under the sky

Nidhan – the nation needs aluminium , why do you resist, after all it's a question
of the entire nations good in comparison to these few scattered villages.

He looked at me in the eye
Expressionless
And picked up his scythe that lay on the ground
and said
Do you see this scythe, with this I can cut grass.
how would you describe that action.
you would describe it as the act of cutting.
Now if you take the same knife and cut my throat
how would you describe this action.
Again you could describe it as 'cutting'
like a verb. The knife cut here, the knife cut there.
Then he asked can you explain to me the difference between these two cuttings.
Once you explain to me the difference between these two cuttings, I will then
answer your question
and explain to you the difference between
the nations good and our good
and the good of this valley.

Between these two questions, these two verbs
Hanging in mid air is a frame
With an image
That lies in a little museum
Down the street , in the corner , in a small rented room

Is there an image there for that look in his eye,
the look that maybe I know the meaning of?
That little halt, a brief sigh inside the eye.

The steam disappeared from the window pane
of that little room into the sunlight that shines on the

new lemon green leaves that I now suddenly see.
I realise then that it had rained through the night.
That I had been lost in that look longer than I knew.
Is there an image for that look in your eye, the look
that maybe I know the meaning of?

It was my mother's birthday,
I knew but I had forgotten that it was her 70th.
Is there an image for that forgetting?

Thet Win Aung was a student leader in Burma.
They sentenced him to 59 years in prison.
Is there an image for the length of that sentence.

They met for an hour not knowing that they will never meet again. Is there an image
for the realisation 15 years later that that was the last meeting?

The hypocrisy of his beautiful car screams down the highway as it races through
the yellow mustard fields, watched by the farmer's sons and ignored by the visiting
purple moor hens that were busy finding food in the wet soil. Is there an image
for the scream?

They created an image that was meant to lie
They then created another image to convince me about the truth of that lie.
They obliterated every dream I had, my home, my love, my family, my land, my
trees, my river.
They annihilated every sign of my ancestors.
They disregarded every plea and discredited my anger.
Is there an image for the hope that still lies in my heart?
Is there an image for the fear that refuses to leave their heart?

If the image comes from the minds eye then can it ever be separated from the
meal that was cooked last night when he began to tell the story of that day when
everything seemed lost and a strange sinking feeling took over... in the story...
they waited doing nothing , endlessly, unable to even express their grief when one
day there was a knock on the door. The little girl who was now big opened the door.
She came in, took a step and then stood silently and wept as her eyes saw all of
us sitting staring at her. Happiness had returned and the blood began to flow inside
our bodies again.

The image is that icon within which the blood flows. Within which memories oscillate relentlessly and silently between the past and the future. Our gaze being the present. We and the image together become the totem for the story telling to begin between her ancestors and the squirrel on the branch outside your window. To read the image means to resonate with this dialogue between memory and time. But in every direction.

For the moment, the rest is bogus. Irrelevant. Mythical facades of colour and light. Like a series of mirages manufactured by a profit making monster. Is it not so? So many images surround us continuously eating away at our insides so that we lose the sense of what is real and important. So that every word begins to have two meanings. It's real meaning and its opposite as well. So eventually you do not know what to believe and so all beliefs become meaningless.

Is there a reason to remember? Do you know the way to that little museum. Why are the images there different from the others? Why does an image seem to contain many secrets? What is it that can release them so as to connect with many unknown lives.

If I find the ordinary icon, the secrets that lie within that image, the dialogues that reside there then do I find meaning for my self?? If I find meaning then my audience finds meaning as well. The two meanings, mine and theirs will never be the same and should not as well.

When I find myself the audience finds themselves too.

Is there an unseen line through the centre of the dancers body? What happens when she finds it during a performance?

Is a film a series of still images?

Is life a series of still moments where each moment contains time, birth and death and does time keep oscillating back and forth through every moment even as it moves ahead towards a destination.

Or maybe time has no end and it continues on forever.

Or maybe it's a revolving ellipse of a million layers, each layer marginally displaced from the other with lives repeating at different times.

Or maybe time occasionally leaves behind something. Is there a way to see that which seems to have disappeared but hasn't. Is there a reason to remember?

But not everyone archives in the same way. So maybe time does not move in a straight line. Maybe it can also originate from points and spread in many directions even as it moves forwards and back wards. Like a forest and its inhabitants remembering so as to allow the seasons to burn, moisten and freeze memories in cyclical dialogue. Constantly interconnecting. So every revelation triggers a cascade of revelations. Just like the rain.

It was 47 degrees when we reached. The young boy said this is it. This is where we have to go. The driver looked around incredulously. Surprised and confused and then silently withdrew to let others do what they want to do. Can we go under that tree, in the shade, for a moment.

Yes. We could. In a little while the hot air suddenly rose up silently taking with it a handful of dry leaves.

A mini tornado like swirl just about 10 feet high. A spray of dust levitating vertically below the leaves. Was it a message since we had just arrived? Only for a lunatic the boy replied with scorn in his eyes.

One hour later. Now in the small forest. Silent, probably because of the white heat of the afternoon. Again everything dry, brown, about to crackle. Another quiet gust of wind. A vertical swirl of air, leaves and dust but this time twice as high. Almost as high as the trees. Still not a message — I asked? Yes the boy smiled and admitted. It is, it's a salaam, what else can it be.

Is there an image for the space that exists between the eye of the witness and the scene of crime. Can the witness be a tree? Can I draw a graph marking the dates of her trial in court on the silhouette of the hill where she hid?

Is there an image for the afternoon, evening and night and for that which is spoken and unspoken, there but not there, to be remembered but to be forgotten continuously. For the survivor who is still hiding. Is there an image for that hiding?

Just the other day, she won her case, after five years in court the judge finally convicted the 12 accused for murder and rape. I saw her on the television in a press conference. She was in a burka. Confident.

Sometimes its hard to tell and impossible to retain as well. Finally I tell but you are then sworn to secrecy. Now I rest while you burn with my secret. So you change its clothes, my name, the appearance of the characters, the geography of the location, even the language of your story is new so that the secret can be reborn. Then it comes

out into the public. In disguise. It's actually mine but now reborn so also now yours. Is there an image that can trace the route of the bird flying in the sky.

How to talk about pain? Is there an image for what lies behind suffering? When you wove that sarong in memory of her murder why did you make the patterns so beautiful and the colours so vivid. You spoke of her and your design with so much love that I think I have to thank you for helping me to find my own words and pictures.

Everyone recalls differently. Individuals and communities. Differently alone and differently together. Maybe in words or in songs and stories, probably in gestures, little pencil marks or simply in a look. Maybe it can be recalled but only through that stone under the tree or in the tangent that lies in the new jewellery that was bought just yesterday. Or the wooden kitchen window from where she said to her child — that's from where we saw them take auntie down the street. Fifty seven years ago. So the child remembers of course but auntie resides in the wooden window for eternity. That wooden window is the container of that morning fifty seven years ago and of every single day in time since then. Forwards and backwards. Forever. You, me, auntie, the niece and the child all together. ...Hanging in mid air

Between the two verbs.
In every street corner.
Behind the mechanics shop.
Outside the special economic zones.
Inside the universities.
On the common land between the fields.
By the water mill in the alpines.

Lies the little museum.

The Little Museum that contains the image filled with the secrets of time and the bulb, the scythe and the cycle. And the window, the fire from the pyre and maybe even one day the look of love she sometimes fleetingly reveals.

And one more thing — just before I forget. The company surveyors came in a helicopter the other day. The villagers fired arrows, threw stones and it could not land so it flew away.

Apparently every one cheered. We lost that image forever. There was no camera there. If you have cameras to spare please leave them gently near the projector.

And one last thing, twenty days ago.

The company people came to take water from the irrigation reservoir but the villagers built a brick and cement wall so they couldn't take the water. They had a camera so the image of that wall is there to see for all times to come.