

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew interviewed by Andrew Cohen

AC: *The lenticular technique of your "Virtual Immigrant Series" pulls the viewer in. Some might wonder only about the technique, while others, hopefully, see the portraits as you intended: complex, multidimensional individuals.*

AM: I think I should better explain the series and the process a bit more before addressing your question.

*"The Virtual Immigrant"* draws on the experience of call center workers in India. These Virtual Immigrants become Americans/Westerners for a workday but remain physically in India. To work in these call centers, Indians study American/Western culture and either neutralize their Indian accents and/or adopt American ones. They virtually work between cultures without leaving their country of origin. The tangible markers of identity such as race, ethnicity, gender or class, are made more malleable and flexible for the Virtual Immigrant. [1]

The work explores the magnified cultural dislocation caused by technology's effect on collapsing borders and shrinking distances. The installation consists of lenticular prints and audio excerpts from interviews with the call center workers.

The lenticular prints in this series are derived from two photographs that have been spliced and reassembled and mounted against a lenticular lens so that from one angle you view a portrait of the call center worker in his/her "work" clothes, usually perceived as more Western. From the other angle the Virtual Immigrant appears dressed in clothes that he/she may wear for a more formal occasion, which is invariably Indian. The lenticular prints combined with the audio suggest the impact of globalization and Westernization on the Virtual Immigrant.

In answer to your question, I think the lenticular technique allows the viewer to better understand the Virtual Immigrants experience. Because of the size of the images, (approx 50 x 70 inches) the viewer has to move back and forth to see the two portraits (a metaphor for the Virtual Immigrant's experience) while simultaneously listening to the audio of the call center workers. The audio explains some of the effects of the industry on their lives and psyche. There is a fascination with the technique, which makes the viewer spend time examining the portraits and listening more intently to the audio.

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[1] Ong, Aihwa. *Flexible Citizenship*. Duke University Press. 1-26

*AC: I wonder if your 'in-between-ness' plays in this series. There is a tension, or misunderstanding, between some people in USA—where you now live—and outsource workers in India. Did you think about this when you started the series?*

AM: It's definitely something I have thought about. I don't think there is a black and white answer to the consequences of outsourcing both in India and in the West. The *Virtual Immigrant* addresses some of the grey areas. Hearing the audio compiled from a number of interviews, gives an insight into some of the internal struggles that exist within the call center workers. There are pluses and minuses related to outsourcing jobs. This project mainly focuses on the consequences for/on Indians.

The outsourcing of jobs in the US has become a political topic. As sympathetic as I am to the people that have lost jobs in the USA, I think the American consumer needs to also take responsibility for jobs going overseas. Americans need to realize that outsourcing is also a result of their demand for cheap prices.

My interest in the *Virtual Immigrant* also arises from their similar 'in-between' experience, which relates to migration/immigration in a real and for them, virtual world.

*AC: While the workers are individuals, they also represent a group—call center workers. Did you wish to show this group in an empathetic manner, especially for a Western audience?*

AM: I wanted to show the call center workers that I interviewed and photographed as individuals whether the audience is Indian or Western.

*AC: I think they are successful as individual portraits. I wonder, what was your selection process? Why did you choose these particular individuals? How?*

AM: As I grew up in Bengaluru, I know a number of people in the call center industry. A friend works as a call center trainer and I asked her to contact a cross section of people for me to interview. They range from different socioeconomic, religious, age, regional and educational backgrounds. I interviewed and photographed more people than have been included in the exhibition.

*AC: Ones that are not included, was that based on aesthetic considerations?*

AM: Their exclusion was based on technical issues with lighting or not being able to line up the images for the lenticular prints. When I started the project, I didn't have this technique in mind.

AC: *Do you notice a big difference in viewers' response when exhibited in USA (or the "West") and in India?*

AM: This is the first time *The Virtual Immigrant* will be exhibited in India and I am looking forward to the response!

AC: *Certainly there is a different viewer reaction to your "Bollywood Satirized" series depending on where it is exhibited, right?*

AM: Yes, I show the "Bollywood Satirized" work in alternate ways like movie theaters as slides before the movie, on the sides of buses etc. When the work was shown at my University, the Indian graduate students protested that I was talking about issues that according to them should not be discussed. I have done many presentations to South Asian student groups in India, USA and Bangladesh and it always leads to a discussion. When I have shown the work in England, there has been a different level of discussion as the British have more of an understanding of Indian culture and ask different questions than when the work is shown in the USA. In India, the discussions are more with younger audiences.

AC: *This Bollywood series again is based very much on your own experience and often has your own image included. What makes the work so powerful to many viewers is its forceful critique on being a woman in India.*

AM: *Bollywood Satirized* is based on my experiences from approximately 20 years of living in India. But it also comes from a different time in my life. Some people defensively say that India has changed and the issues I address don't happen anymore. Of course there has been a lot of improvements but a lot of these issues still exist, like the dowry system, especially in a more materialistic India.

AC: *Yes, and that makes the content still important, even if the technique of reconfiguring Bollywood posters has been adopted by others by now. Presenting 'Women issues' remains relevant; is this a major concern of yours? Earlier you said some Indians' protest that you are talking about such topics. Surely this means it remains raw and relevant.*

AM: It does remain relevant. But as someone who frequently visits India but doesn't live there anymore, I feel hesitant to critique a situation that I experienced fifteen years ago. Luckily there are younger artists who are addressing these issues now.

AC: *Even though your work is personal, born from your experience, again it resonates with others because of universal themes. Just now we discussed difficulties women confront and your Bollywood series. Your "An Indian from India" though is very much about your experience, and to me represents a powerful critique on Colonial and Post-Colonial subjugation and manipulations. Again, how much of the*

*'big issues' inform your work conceptually, or is it something that comes out later, possibly more through viewer response?*

AM: *An Indian from India* started because of the trivial question that I would often get, which was "Where are you from?" The questioner would think that as an "Indian" I was a Native American! As I researched the history and archival photos of the Native Americans, I soon realized that there was a powerful critique that could be explored photographically by the uncanny joining together of the two histories. I realized that by holding hands with the Native Americans, it allows us to reverse the gaze to question our colonial and post-colonial history.

AC: *Would it be accurate to say the prevalent theme of your work centers on memory and/or identity?*

AM: To me the prevalent theme in my work is about navigating between multiple cultures. Being born in England, growing up in India and now living in the United States, my varied background influences my perspective and the art work I make.

Drawing on my experience as a young woman growing up in India after a childhood in England, where I experienced relative gender equality, the portfolio *Bollywood Satirized* explores my own rejection of certain traditional women's roles in Indian society.

In *An Indian from India*, I look at the other "Indian." I play on my own "otherness," using photographs of Native Americans from the late Nineteenth Century and early Twentieth Century that perpetuated and reinforced stereotypes. I find similarities in how the Nineteenth and early Twentieth century photographers of Native Americans looked at what they called the "primitive natives," in ways that is similar to the colonial gaze of the Nineteenth century British photographers working in India.

In the project *The Virtual Immigrant*, I explore the ways that workers in customer-service call centers in India similarly navigate between cultures. They bifurcate their dress, speech and lives between the culture where they work, India and the Western culture within their workplace. Because they are interacting with Westerners while physically in India, they seem to virtually live between cultures without leaving their country of origin.

My latest project, *Re-Generations*, explores the viewer's ideas about time and the warping of cultures over time. I collapse the presumed progression of time, so the past and present, Indian and Western, appear in the same virtual space.

AC: *Isn't much of this memory, either your own or a collective? And how identities manifest and negotiate? Even your newest Re-Generation, at least to me, shows generational connections, which can be called 'memory'.*

AM: When one creates a photo, the moment that is frozen is instantly also the past. The resulting photograph may also be an artifact or a document. Some of my work deals with memory, history, actual experiences, perceived experiences and their psychological effects.

*Re-Generation* shows connections between generations and subtle differences. Yes, by using the old photographs it readily brings up the connotation of memory and experiences, actual or perceived.

AC: *Being a 'diaspora' Indian artist puts you into an interesting in-between space that, depending on your inclination, can either be easily transcended, or a fertile topic for exploration.*

AM: Living between cultures allows me to understand each of these cultures in a different way as I belong to each and yet I don't. It makes for a different perspective in our global world.

AC: *Is there a downside? I mean Professionally.*

AM: I suppose the downside is how others categorize artists. I will never be Indian enough. It's true, a number of cultures have influenced me and consequently my work.

AC: *It is humorous to hear you say 'I'd never be Indian enough'. You must be one mixed up Indian—and I'm jokingly referring to your "An Indian from India."*

AM: It is ironic! In America, first generations Indians are called ABCD – American Born Confused Desi. But I am an English Born, India Brought up, America Living Confused Desi. In other words an EBIBALCD!

\*Dr. Andrew Cohen is an art historian of India whose research spans from medieval to contemporary India. He is Professor and Chair, Art and Design Department, Monmouth University, New Jersey, USA.

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew's recent exhibitions include *Sepia International*, New York City, *RISD Museum*, Newark Art Museum, 2009 *Guangzhou Biennial of Photography*, China, 2006 *Noorderlicht Photo Festival* in Netherlands and the 2005 *Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal Photo Biennale* in Canada.

In 2007, Matthew was the first of three artists to be awarded the MacColl Johnson Fellowship in Visual Arts. Among the list of other grants recently supporting Matthew's work include the John Gutmann Fellowship, Rhode Island State Council of the Arts Fellowship and the American Institute of Indian Studies Creative Arts fellowship. She was recently an artist in residence at the Yaddo Colony, Saratoga Springs, NY and the MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, NH. Her work can be found in the collection of the George Eastman House, Fogg Museum, Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Center for Creative Photography and the RISD Museum among others.

Matthew's work is included in the book BLINK from Phaidon, that according to the publisher celebrates the quality and vision of today's 100 most exciting international contemporary photographers and the upcoming book *Self-Portraits* by Susan Bright.

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew is Professor of Art (Photography) at the University of Rhode Island in Kingston, Rhode Island and is represented by Sepia International Inc., New York City & Tasveer Gallery, India.