

## "WE ARE ALL MEAT, STRIVING TO BE HUMAN"

Drawing from Eastern philosophies and Western existentialisms, Neha Choksi talks to **Craig Dworkin** about altering consciousness, performing absence and mapping presence through her work.



**CRAIG DWORKIN:** Let me open quite broadly: could you say something about how you think of the relation between 'material' and its opposites?

**NEHA CHOKSI:** I admire change. As an artist, I am drawn to materials that deform and to the residues of deformation in all materials. It is really attention-grabbing. Look at me. I am material, I change, I drop, I droop, I deliquesce, I crumple, I transform, I am change itself. I am also simultaneously thinking about absence or absencing, about erasure, about emptiness, about loss, not only from a melancholic and even morbid disposition, but also because one way to present materiality is to diminish it, vanish it, absent it. (For example, think of *Echo of the Inside* and *The Inside is Perpetual*.) After all, absence is part of reality, contingent on a positive reality, and is perceived or apprehended as such. The later Nyaya-Vaisesika ontology has a neat way of parsing absence: there is prior absence (the ground before the plant grew), destructional absence (the ground after the tree is cut down), absolute absence (a singing, dancing tree), and mutual absence (the tree not being a boulder, and vice versa). I would say that my work more often than not is linked with destructional absence, although sometimes with the others, too. I am also attracted to the Jain philosophy of *anekantavada* which is a postulation of non-onesidedness. It leads to an acknowledgement of multiple viewpoints. Combining the two thoughts helps me to posit both presence and absence as coexisting simultaneously in one object. And this helps me appreciate the finitude and the ultimate meaninglessness and insignificance of human existence.

Temporal awareness imbues everything with *memento mori* for the passing away of everything material under the sun. However, I am not dogmatic in my materialism. I do accede to a reality that is subjective. I don't want to give undue importance to semantic issues that hover around dualism. Thus, everything alters physically, depending on one's viewpoint; there is nothing whole and pure and unchanging about a single material. Vitality there is no purity of the material or of the artform as far as I am concerned.

**Neha Choksi.** *The Inside Is Perpetual*. Suite of 7 photographs. 14.5" x 14.5" each. 2010-2011. Image courtesy the artist and Project 88.

**CD:** So concepts like presence/absence or material/immaterial are better thought of not as properties in the world, but rather as perspectives from which we view the world? What might seem to be tangible, material and present appears – from another perspective – simply one stage of a process on its way toward inevitable dissipation or dissolution. Or what seems like absence at one moment is ultimately the ground that permits us to recognize any presence at all.

When you mention the "meaninglessness and insignificance of human existence," do you see that in terms that Sartre or Beckett would recognize, or do you want to distinguish tenets of Eastern philosophies from Western existentialisms?

**NC:** In my work, concepts of absence, nothingness, emptiness (and presence) are best understood as processes rendered in material terms. Maybe 'nothing' and 'something' are better seen and perceived than contemplated in the abstract. I am eschewing immateriality for now. So, yes, the concepts circling around absence share multiple perspectives, and more importantly multiple physical manifestations and valences in meaning.

Why would I want to juggle these various viewpoints? In order to grapple with my awe at emptiness, which I think everything is imbued with. Because we are all grand nothings, struggling to become itty bitty somethings. We are all meat, striving to be human. To animate that meat is to become human, to admit to that nothingness is to recognize affect. In a world where one experiences grief and cruelty, violence and love, all of which have different but undeniable relations to nothingness, I am often taken aback by two things: how little I can control my environment and how much I can control my environment. These two valences struggle, and depending on which wins the day, I wallow or flourish. But those are psychological struggles, as opposed to existential ones. Appreciating finite life contributes to one's experiencing the current world as literally

momentous and meaningful, along with an understanding of the ultimate meaninglessness and insignificance of human existence. Death is not a shared experience. In a sense, everything is shadowed by nothing in the way that a foggy day disperses the sun and leaves no shadows. The fog is our fear and our freedom. And I deal with that fog by presenting emptyings and erasures in my work.

I do appreciate the Absurd. Perhaps more as understood by Artaud than by Beckett, or at least, I appreciate the drive to involve a bit of notional or actual cruelty. This is an acknowledgment of the pain that life entails and of the resolve that allows life to continue. The video works in the *Trilogy on Absenting – Leaf Fall, Minds to Lose and Iceboat* – have that sense of the absurd, that despair and self-indulgence, lingering in their frames, not by being an acolyte of the Theatre of Cruelty – I am not – as much as by thinking through what made sense to me at that point of time in my life (when the works were conceived), when I

had lost a sense of self and was struggling to make sense of the despair and emptiness of daily life through seemingly absurd and somewhat harsh interventions. So I removed the leaves from a tree, had myself and four farm animals anesthetized, and rowed a boat of ice. I am creating “boundary situations,” which is a useful idea from Husserl, where an extreme moment of intense pressure allows truth to be intuited. Instead of a moment, I create events, where the change in state from before to after occurs. The truth drawn out is a certain human freedom to experience that emptiness and loss. There is some of that theatrical catharsis (for me, not the audience, mind you) through the invented rituals of leaf-shedding, losing consciousness and iceboat rowing. Additionally, I also appreciate that subjective – for which, ironically, read visceral – reasons drive people, including me, to act the way they do rather than purely rational thought processes.

**Neha Choksi.** *Iceboat.* Performance and video. HD, colour, widescreen, sound. 13'35". 2013. Video still courtesy the artist and Project 88.





Neha Choksi. *Petting Zoo*. Performance for Khoj Live 08, Delhi. 2008. Video still courtesy the artist, Project 88 and Khoj. Photo credit: Khoj International Artist Association.

Neha Choksi. *Leaf Fall*. Performance and video. HDV, colour, widescreen, sound, subtitles. 14'15". 2008. Video still courtesy the artist and Project 88.

**CD:** *Minds to Lose* opens out in interesting directions: it's a durational work, timed to the effects of the anaesthesia; and it recalls endurance pieces from Chris Burden on down – though with the twist that it involves drugs meant to make enduring something easier. At the same time, in the way Trajal Harrell's *Tickle the Sleeping Giant* (2008) questions the essence of dance by presenting dancers asleep under the influence of Ambien, *Minds to Lose* questions the boundaries of performance itself, displacing the activity from the artist to the audience, with the politics of that displacement underscored by the anaesthetized's vulnerability. I'm wondering to what degree you see absence as an invitation? In both your sculpture *A Dog-eared Sheet of Paper* and the performance *Close (the distance)*, for instance, you provide blank paper as something for the audience to fill, as a venue for expression rather than the negation of expression.

**NC:** Yes, the genre of performance is thus ever so slightly enlarged, by engaging the notion of the inert body. *Petting Zoo* – the live performance behind the video *Minds to Lose* – was presented in the context of a festival where many artists



presented a body in motion, or controlled contortion. I wanted to add the body at rest to that conversation, as well as the brain at rest: the driving force behind the body. I also wanted to complicate ideas of free will; thus, the decision to present on-screen the anaesthetization of *domesticated* animals, as already and always unfree, as them possibly enjoying under anaesthesia their only free moments from human-enforced drudgery. Interestingly, to tie it in with Trajal Harrell's title, upon awakening after the performance, I learned that some artists tried to tickle me in order to provoke an action from me. This tickling of the asleep is an unfulfilled desire for reciprocity, for raw reaction, and it is what drives a portion of *Petting Zoo* for the onlooker.

*Minds to Lose* featured 6 videos that recapitulated in a loop the going-under and the coming-to from anaesthesia for all of us. In the live performance, only I was knocked out, whereas the animals were drowsy but free to move. The disparity between the live petting zoo and the video imagery was useful in opening up the issues of vulnerability of the conscious versus the unconscious; what does it mean to forget permanently 20 minutes of your life? It is a mini death; it is the loss of the present past. Anaesthesia creates the loss of experience or offers a limit to experience. It is the ultimate nothing still available to the living.

*Close (the distance)*, on the other hand, doesn't embed any desire for reciprocity as much as the desire is for me, my open body, to provoke something in the audience. So, anyone present could take an ink transfer from any part of my naked body, and they were to make a postcard of it after thinking of something they had left unsaid, and then send it off to someone they know far, far away. It was another way of circumventing words in the very forum – a postcard – intended for words, and for letting the body risk itself as an object once more. The whole performance is tilted towards engaging with what does not exist, words that were left unsaid that I am asking the audience to remember and towards engaging with my body as the site of remembrance. Similarly, eschewing words, *Dog Ear* was meant to be a silent sculptural intervention in the cacophony of a magazine issue dedicated to sculpture. It was meant as a memorial to the blank but far from empty page. We dog ear what we want to remember or emphasize because we were moved by a text, so *Dog Ear* proposes its absence as worth all those acts and emotions. It creates a space for the expression and imagination, but also for their failure.

In all these works, which involve disengagement as an aesthetic act, the audience shoulders responsibility for their actions.

**CD:** From amnesia to memorial, these works all engage memory, which also plays into the dynamics of absence; part of the force of the denuded tree or the melted boat is

the viewer's memory of the leaves and ice. By marking a distinction, with its doubled dialectic of past and present, memory also directly engages questions of time. From the brief period of unconsciousness to the evolutionary time of domestication, how do you see temporality working in your investigations?

**NC:** From a blunt interstellar time scale, our fine distinctions are precious and in vain. Consider the extreme behaviour in the works, particularly anesthetization and denuding a tree leaf by leaf, but also the obsessively cyclic camera work in *Sweetheart*, or long stretches of twenty minutes of video black following the cyclical play of sunsets in *The Weather Inside Me (Bombay Sunset)*. They are like pinching one's forearm, a wake up call to live in the present. Faced with the usual overwhelming losses over a normal lifetime, it can be hard to inhabit the present. It might be made easier if we remember that we lose in the end and if we compare that loss against the vastness of time. These are small gestures, a phenomenological means to an awareness of that temporal vastness. Not that the gestures have anything like the authority of finality: the animals and I will revive from unconsciousness, the leaves of the peepul tree will grow back, and for some moments I will only flail in the lake and not drown in it. The gestures can only evoke finality and futility. Maybe the cycling between presence and absence reminds us of the limitations of memory and knowledge and the rest of what's on our minds. All moments are present at the core absencing moment. In the cycling there is no progress. There is only elegy. It answers for our obligation to remember what is dear, by observing a past presence in a present absence.

This conversation was conducted via e-mail from May 13<sup>th</sup> to June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014, between Salt Lake City, Portland, and Bombay.

**Neha Choksi.** *The Weather Inside Me (Bombay Sunset)* [Detail]. 9 CRT tube television sets, 9 dvds, 1 photograph. Dimensions variable. 40 minutes loop. 2010. Video still courtesy the artist and Project 88.

