

S h a n a y J h a v e r i

PRADEEP DALAL'S CONTRAPUNTAL MOVES AND BHOPAL, MP



Installation view, Pradeep Dalal: 'Copy/Scan/Print/Repeat' at Sala Diaz, San Antonio, Texas, USA, April-June, 2017.



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Bhopal MP (2017) is Pradeep Dalal's first artist book. It is not surprising that Dalal would eventually make an artists book of his own. Books in the past have literally at times formed the basis for Dalal's artistic output. He has printed photographs to the sizes of books he has liked or in the case of *Measure 1* (Vadakunathan) (2009) series inserted particular images into open books. In his installation for *Strange Invitation* at Franklin Street Works in 2013, his *Maitiere/Matter* (2013) photographs were not only displayed alongside scanned images from pages of books that informed the making of those work, but also his photographs were presented hanging, sliding or flat on accompanying bookshelves. Needless to say, Dalal's work persistently bares the trace and impact of many a book, and *Bhopal MP* is no exception.

The interplay between low resolution Xerox copies and high resolution scans of two books authored by Jagdish Swaminathan, *The Perceiving Fingers* (1987) and *The Magical Script* (1983), both published by the Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal form the visual spine of Dalal's artist's book. They are listed bibliographically on the outer slipcase of *Bhopal MP* alongside two buildings designed by Charles Correa — Bharat Bhavan (1975-81) and Vidhan Bhavan (1980-96)

as being the chief contents of this book, but on closer bearing, are revealed not to be its true subjects of inquiry. Dalal's inquest is not simply to study and analyse Correa's buildings and Swaminathan's essays. He would be poised to do so, as a trained architect who worked in Correa's firm in the late 1980s or now as the Director of the Warhol Foundation's Arts Writers Program. Instead, it is the questing ideological and intellectual impulses that motivated Correa and Swaminathan in the late 1970s - early 1980s, and how they manifested and expressed themselves in Bharat Bhavan, Vidhan Bhavan, *The Perceiving Fingers* and *The Magical Script* that preoccupy Dalal.

It was the personal endeavor of the IAS officer Ashok Vajpeyi to institute a 'multi-arts' center in Bhopal, which brought Correa and Swaminathan into correspondence with one another. While Correa was tasked with designing the actual building that would become Bharat Bhavan, Swaminathan was

entrusted with formulating a vision for Roopankar, the fine arts annex of the organisation. Both Correa and Swaminathan, in Dalal's estimation would make and execute proposals that share a similar logic, and reveal them to be determined questioning modernists. Correa's tiered building plan has no real façade, with its many rooms open to sky courtyards, and shallow plinths allowing for graceful transitions from inside to the outside, while in the galleries Swaminathan would choose to present folk, tribal and contemporary art altogether. What Correa enacts at Bharat Bhavan is an amplification of a tutorial from Le Corbusier, to not let a single feature impose itself throughout the architecture, but admit to a configuration of multiple features, arriving at an architecture which can be modern, by also being directly responsive to local climate and living patterns, while Swaminathan gamely challenged notions of a "modern sense of



Bharat Bhavan and J. Swaminathan essay, excerpted from "Bhopal, MP" artist book.



Bharat Bhavan and Korwa drawings, excerpted from "Bhopal, MP" artist book.

contemporaneity" where "the person who creates in the cities is entitled to the privilege of being called an 'artist' while the one who creates in the village or in the forests is no more than a 'craftsman'."¹

As Dalal writes in a short, ruminative text "Contrapuntal Moves and Counter-System: Notes included in Bhopal, MP", both Correa and Swaminathan at the moment of the birthing of this arts complex are engrossed with matching, elaborating, and even transforming, in their own ways, the 'lessons' of modern Western art and architecture by formulating a series of counterpoints which come to be embodied by the buildings of



Jangarh Singh Shyam, excerpted from "Bhopal, MP" artist book.

Bharat Bhavan and in the expansive and inclusive collection it houses. Wonderfully lucid, and very incisive, as the accordion insert unfurls, more of Dalal's own approach comes into view. He acknowledges that he first made the visit to Bharat Bhavan not so much for the architecture, as might have been expected, but to see the works of Jangarh Singh Shyam and drawings by the Korwa tribes. Written in the first person, Dalal's words are precise, carefully chosen and narrate his journey. Perceptive and almost quotidian observations are supported by evocative quotes from Correa, Swaminathan and the poet A. K. Ramanujan. A gradual, iterative, measured and accretive method of working comes into view: For example his search for the two aforementioned books, and how he was unable to find one in Bhopal at the Bharat Bhavan library, only to be given a Xerox of another, and then quite surprisingly to find both publications in a library in New York.

Bhopal MP is occasioned because of Dalal and his own 'bifocal frame of reference'², produced according to and by his subjective transnational meanderings and scholarly inclinations. There is an elliptical quality to Dalal's prose — part travelogue, part diary — but it does not carry the whiff of a

narcissistic autobiography. Instead a slight portrait of him does emerge from what he is reading and seeing, and by deferring attention to what he seeks out, he is able to sign off by proposing a compelling historical reconsideration where "the architecture of Bharat Bhavan counters and re-imagines received ideas of modern architecture. And Jangarh Singh Shyam's potent art as well as the 'protest' art of the Hill Korwa tribes require their place in a genuine understanding of modern and contemporary art."³ The tone he sets is inviting, almost intimate, but never confessional, which is crucial to note because for Dalal the process of sharing is generative and productive.

Bhopal MP, consists of the insert with Dalal's text and a 96 page tape bound paperback book. The two are dual components that complement one another — one does not lead the other. In his written text Dalal offers his chronicle; in the book we have visual evidence of that account. It is in moving back and forth between the two that Dalal's inquiry becomes decipherable. Dalal's curious, seeking, itinerant eye guides the sequencing of the book. He purposefully opens and closes with images taken by himself at his residence in New York of a print by Singh Shyam and a drawing by the Korwa on the floor resting against a

wall. This framing device, situates the project firmly within Dalal's subjective realm. It also announces the domestic domain, as the primary site of where this artist book has been assembled. Between these two images Dalal intersperses black and white photographs he has taken of Correa's buildings in Bhopal with entire scans of Swaminathan's texts, a complete inventory list for the works by Singh Shyam and the Korwa in the Bharat Bhavan, as well as, quietly inserting a few manipulated scans works of his own — a particularly evocative full bleed image of Singh Shyam, his eyes framed by the exposed scan line.

There is a conspicuous absence of authorial text in the book. Dalal has crafted an image flow which is attentive, allowing all these varied materials to rebound and reflect one another. Swaminathan's words are made available through either the poor Xeroxes or the high resolution scans, in English and Hindi — as they were originally published — alongside Dalal's photographs of the exterior aspects of the Correa buildings. Dalal's images of the buildings are taken informally, as he himself wandered around the complex; becoming almost visual notes rather than overtly staged, formal architecture studies. They underscore that there are some inherent difficulties



Slipcase cover, "Bhopal, MP" artist book.

in picturing Bharat Bhavan due to the low key aspect of the buildings themselves. Singh Shyam's and the Korwa's works are apprehended with and within these contexts; the Korwa drawings appear as the illustrations to Swaminathan's writing, while Singh Shyam's works can be seen on the walls of Vidhan Bhavan. There are no direct images of the works themselves; they appear in mediation, as found out by Dalal on buildings and in essays, suggesting that the true place of these works is yet to be found out.

Bhopal MP was re-imagined by Dalal as an installation in San Antonio, Texas as *Copy/Scan/Print/Repeat* in June

2017, the title a dead give away to his working process, not only for this artist book, but more generally. In the actual exhibition space Dalal threaded around the two galleries complete Xerox copies of Swaminathan's two texts to scale, anti-clockwise, and above that placed other images from the books that did not directly correspond to the text and others which are not documentary images. By such placements Dalal creates a disjunction, where the image-text relationship is not illustrative, but rather can be apprehended as interpretive. Dalal's predilection for the dislocated image, one that has been serially copied, distanced and



Champa tree in courtyard, excerpted from "Bhopal, MP" artist book.



RSD, New York, Jangarh Singh Shyam, silkscreen print, excerpted from "Bhopal, MP" artist book

displaced from its original framework is unambiguously evident in both the installation and the book. Through these displacements, when the images and words, can or have been made to travel away and outside of their originary charters, Dalal sees creative possibilities, when extrapolative moves can be made, to bring things back into circulation and appreciate them perhaps anew. The images carry with themselves, inscribed in the form of marks, folds, a low res degradation, and residues of the journey they have made, bestowing them with an appealing and affective tactility.

Dalal's entire enterprise pivots around the modest. He commits to the potential of a paucity of means, to a frugality, and what that can engender in not only his understanding of the material he has committed himself to,

but also inform his own artistic process. There is a considered lightness of touch to his handling of these materials, which should not be taken for a carelessness. The bleed through that is evident in "Bhopal, MP" is intentional; Dalal sought out the thinnest Indian paper he could find and supervised the printing himself. "Bhopal, MP" is composed of fragments — essays, images, text — an archive as such of thought, but also the progenitor's of thought, pieces that are organised as to resist a linear narrative, but instead seep into one another, rub up against one another leaving marks and traces, that accumulate and layer up slowly, allowing for a freedom in thought and action. Dalal permits for a natural play between elements that are already related; he has not set up the terms of engagement, but instead see what is

possible when regarding them with a certain fluidity. This is the true achievement of *Bhopal MP* that is only accomplished through Dalal's own peripatetic, small encounters that he conveys in a decidedly subtle and understated manner. Somewhere along the way, the received itinerary of Indian modern and contemporary art from Delhi, Bombay, Baroda is deferred and diverted away, to Bhopal. The contrapuntal move, here, is that this is done in the most persuasive of low voices.

Endnotes

- 1 Ashok Vajpeyi statement in *The Magical Script* (Roopankar, Museum of Fine Arts, Bharat Bhaven, Bhopal, 1983) reproduced in "Bhopal, MP", unpaginated.
- 2 Refer to his artist contribution 'A bifocal frame of reference' in *Western Artists in Creative Inspirations in Art and Design* (The Shoestring Publisher and Thames and Hudson, 2013).
- 3 Pradeep Dalal, 'Contrapuntal Moves and Counter-System: Notes included in "Bhopal, MP" in "Bhopal, MP" (JAK Printers, Mumbai, 2017) unpaginated.

All images courtesy the artist.