

10-9-2009

lacuna in testimony

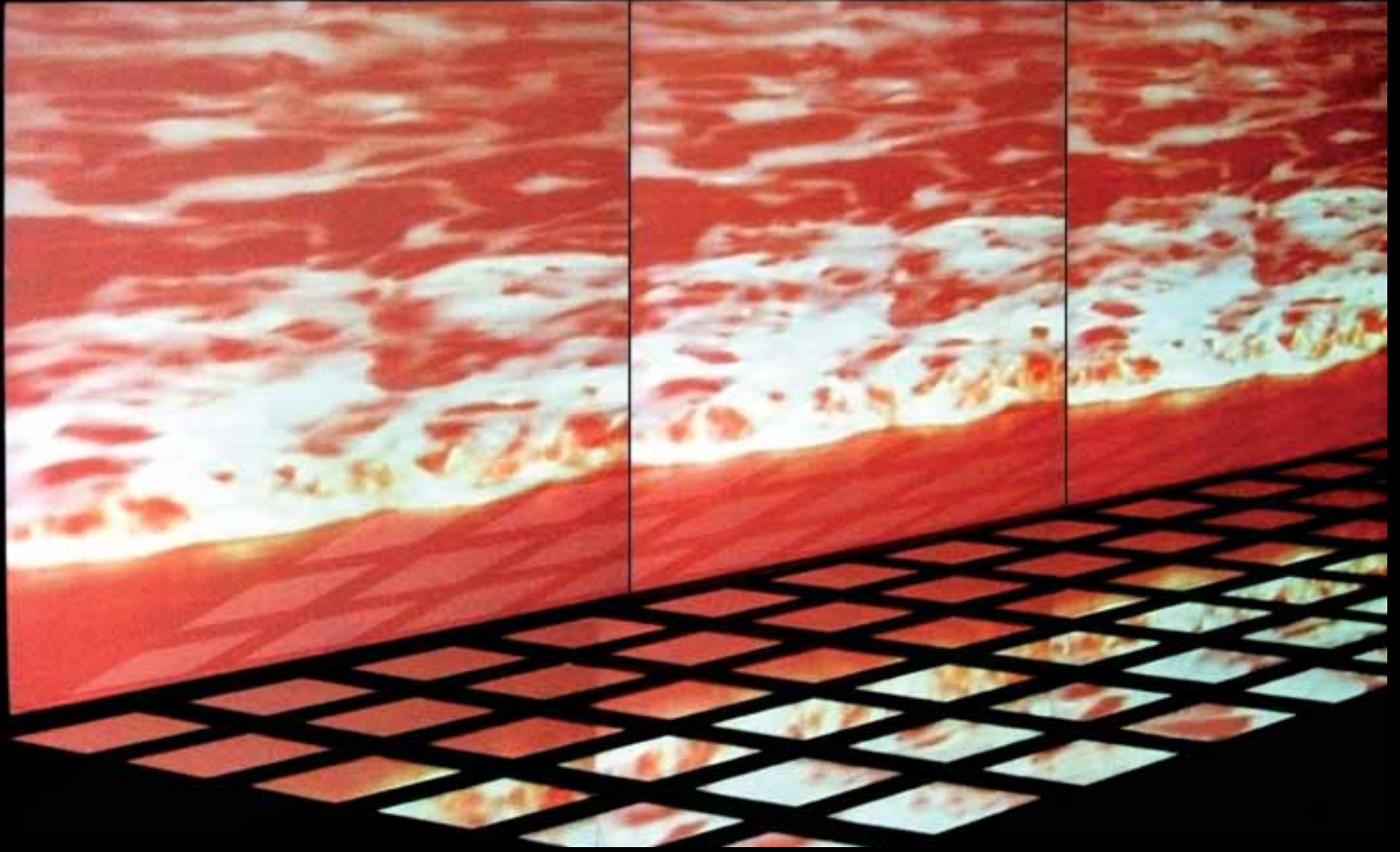
The Patricia and Phillip Frost Art Museum
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l a c u n a i n t e s t i m o n y

O C T O B E R 9 , 2 0 0 9 - J A N U A R Y 1 0 , 2 0 1 0

NAVJOT
ALTAFA

THE PATRICIA & PHILLIP FROST ART MUSEUM
FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

The Frost Art Museum is privileged to exhibit the work of Navjot Altaf, an artist known for creating multi-media works that address the social divisions and religious rifts that have plagued India for generations. Today we know the issues that she has long confronted apply to many parts of the world plagued by violence and oppression. The international context of her work with its strong research component makes it particularly fitting for our university and especially appropriate as we all search for peace and understanding.

Carol Damian
Director and Chief Curator
The Patricia and Phillip Frost Art Museum

Evoking the Unspoken Gaps of Memory

Julia P. Herzberg, Ph.D., curator

Lacuna in Testimony is inspired by the Hindu-Muslim riots that took place on an unprecedented scale in the state of Gujarat, India, in 2002. The months-long strife was sparked by a train fire that claimed the lives of Hindu pilgrims returning from a religious ceremony in Ayodhya.¹ Because Ayodhya was a site of previous communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims, the latter were immediately blamed for the conflagration. The first attacks by Hindu extremists were in Ahmedabad, Gujarat's largest city. In a few days large residential areas lay in ashes, forcing thousands of residents into relief camps.

Several months later Navjot Altaf went to Ahmedabad, where she saw the destruction and spent a week with Muslim women, men, and children in the camps, and in the privacy of conversations, listened to their testimonies and recorded their voices. Traumatized by their harrowing experiences, many had forgotten details of their ordeals. In realizing that those omissions were the invisible evidence, the unknowable parts of their suffering, the artist shaped a visual language to evoke the unspoken gaps in memory.²

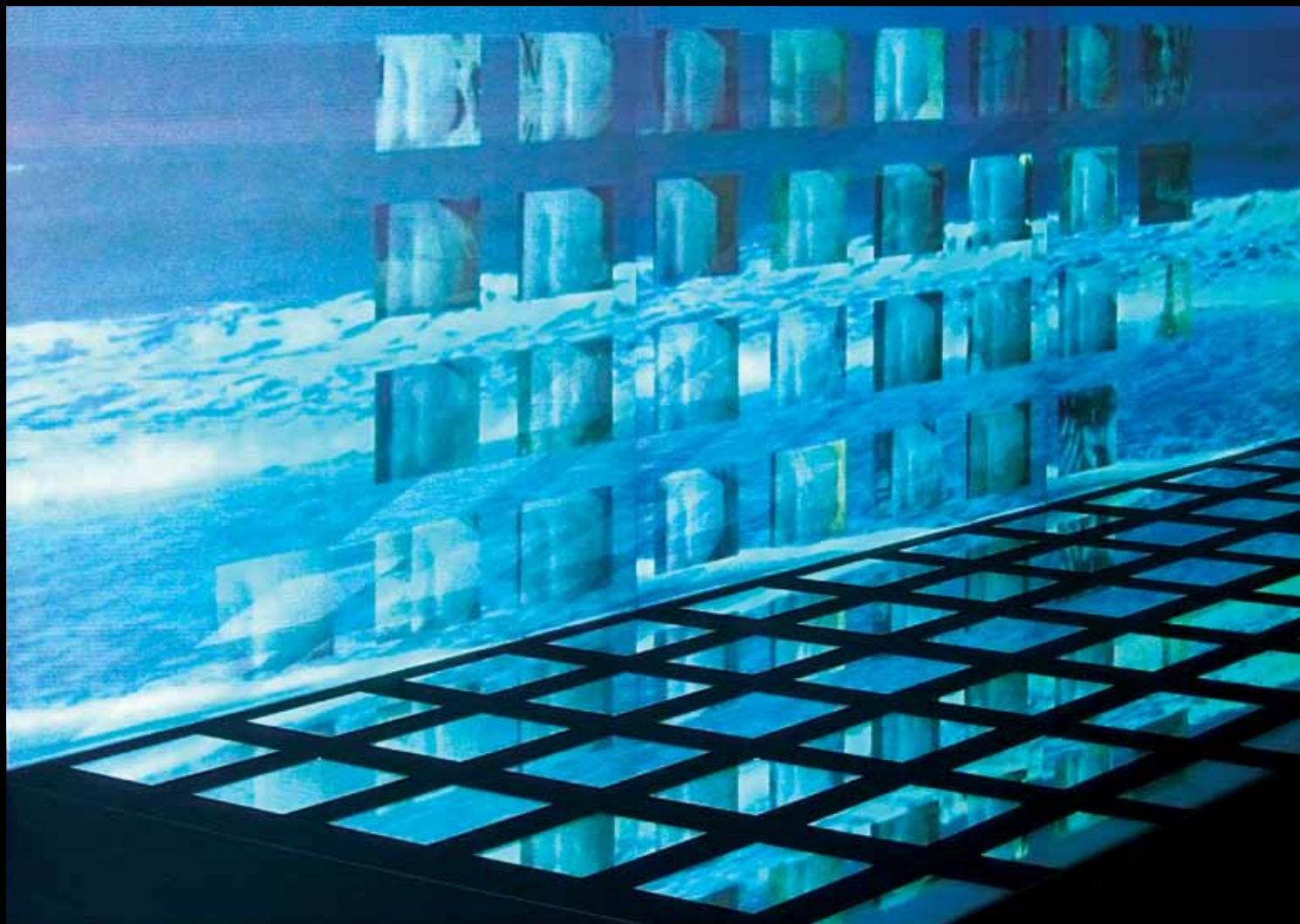
Altaf's video is a nonlinear narrative in which some scenes are clearer than others, in accord with the random nature of the interviewees' recollections. The three-screen projection features a moving image of the Arabian Sea and the sound of rolling waves breaking at the shoreline. Seventy-two rectangular mirrors on the floor reflect the imagery in the windows, creating two spectacular

focal points in the video-installation. The fragmented narrative unfolds against this mesmerizing backdrop of the lulling sea.

The video is constructed within a grid of forty-eight windows, each featuring still or moving images of people, places, and objects, some photographed by the artist, others culled from print media, film, or television. Cumulatively the images suggest intersections of the present and the past where violence and conflict predominated: a water tank from a damaged house in Ahmedabad, a man catching a bus in Mumbai, a Sikh riot in Delhi, glimpses of the Iraqi War, the implosion of the Twin Towers, footage of the Kargil War between India and Pakistan over Jammu and Kashmir, a statue of the Buddha destroyed by the Taliban, a typewriter from Schindler's List. As each scene dissolves, an image of an ice slab replaces it, creating a sense of opacity, frozen time, and loss.

Navjot has deftly created suspense while alluding to forgetting, to the gaps of individual and historical memory. Through slowly timed fade-ins and fade-outs and the ice slab images, one's eye follows the evolving discourse to the forty-eighth window.

There one views a carved window with wish threads from a renowned Sufi shrine, a monument of great significance for followers of different religions who believe in cultural and religious harmony. That final image symbolizes the artist's belief in communal conciliation,



Navjot Altaf

Lacuna in Testimony, 2003

Video-installation: 3 channel video installation with 48 mirrors, 11 x 17 inches each, color and black and white, 7 minutes, 21 seconds

Courtesy of Talwar Gallery, New York and New Delhi

an elusive goal proposed by the founding fathers of India and Pakistan at partition.

All windows fade out, and the blue Arabian Sea fills the three screens as the sound of waves intensifies. Then, in an instant, the video goes black and the title appears, letter by letter:

l a c u n a i n t e s t i m o n y

When the rolling waves reappear, they are red. A child's mutterings become louder as the motion of the waves accelerates. Those climactic moments engulf the viewer just before the sea returns to normal and the haunting voice fades. One grasps that voice and image are metaphors for the contested spaces where life and death, peace and

violence, hope and despair, memory and oblivion, conflict and resolution collide and intersect.

1. In 1992 Hindu fundamentalist youths destroyed the unused Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. Although there is no historical proof, some Indian fundamentalists claim that this mosque had been erected by the Mughal emperor Babur on the site of the Hindu god-king Ram's birthplace. The destruction of the mosque continues to cause tensions between the two religious communities. See Shashi Tharoor, *India: From Midnight to the Millennium* (New York: Arcade Publishing, Inc., 1998), pp. 58, 59, 325.

2. Artist's communication with the author, November 2003 and November 2007.

Navjot Altaf began her career in the early 1970s. Active for over three decades, she has created an oeuvre which constitutes an ever-growing flow of films, sculptures, spatial/ site-specific installations, drawings and photographs that negotiate various disciplinary boundaries traversing art and political activism. The essence of her imagery comes out of her theoretical and methodological innovation, combined with deeply engaged readings of historical and contemporary art, film and cultural theory.

Since 1997 she has been collaborating with Adivasi/indigenous artists and community members on ongoing Nalpar/handpump sites and Pilla Gudi/temples for children, projects in the rural district of Bastar-Chattisgarh in Central India. Through interactive aspects of collaboration, her work emerges out of an extended dialogical interaction and simultaneously alters the conventional relationship between the viewer and the work of art.

The artist continues to work with composers, musicians, documentary filmmakers and craftspeople. She has shown extensively in India at museums and galleries, Fukuoka, Sydney, London, Liverpool/Bolton, Berlin, New York and other places. She lives and works in Mumbai and Bastar.

Sasha Altaf, M.A., art critic



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The Frost Art Museum receives ongoing support from the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs, the Cultural Affairs Council, the Mayor and the Miami-Dade Board of County Commissioners; the State of Florida Department of State, the Florida Division of Cultural Affairs, the Florida Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts; the Steven & Dorothea Green Endowment; Funding Arts Network; Dade Community Foundation; CitiPrivate Bank; The Miami Herald; Target; and the Members & Friends of The Frost Art Museum.



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