

MOUSSE

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Architecture, Archaeology and the Solar Unconscious

BY CECILIA ALEMANI



Within exhibition spaces, Karthik Pandian builds invasive structures that have layered, looped projections emanating from their interstices. Architecture is also the subject explored in some of his films, in which the movement of the camera imitates that of a human body, weaving through rooms. Cecilia Alemani met up with the artist in New York, on the occasion of his show at the Whitney, discovering how his works use architecture to deal with many things, from the power of the sun to that of human beings.

cecilia alemani Let's start with *Darkroom*, your first solo show at Telles in Los Angeles in 2009. You basically turned the gallery into a labyrinth/club: a large scale wooden structure invaded the gallery space, leaving small interstices for the viewer to wander around, while 16 mm projectors nested in pairs inside the scaffolding projected films onto the walls. Can you talk about the idea behind this exhibition? I'm particularly interested in the scale of the object, its obstructing and disorienting power and the choice of materials.

harthik pandian *Darkroom* was basically about copulation: from my research into the literal coupling of bodies in dark corners of German techno clubs to the projectors paired and angled to produce asynchronous streams of superimposed images; from Ejzenštejn's identification of montage with the copulative function of the Japanese ideogram (*weeping* is a conflation of eye and water) to the wetness of the images glimpsed in the projections (rivers, oceans, fountains); from the incessant looping of the six film strips, which wound their way through reels suspended high in the space, to the looping path carved out around the perimeter of the gallery by the structure that nearly fills the volume of the space without touching its walls. Here, the material qualities of film and architecture strobe back and forth. While aggressive in its scale and occupation of the space, the architectural intervention takes the form of a defensive fortification whose fugitive quality is emphasized by its materials: construction scaffolding encased in cheap waferboard. Meanwhile, the films take on the monumental quality of architecture, looping in singular perpetuity in the manner of a fountain. Amidst all this coupling there is a call to disappear – into darkness, into ruined monuments, into half-built buildings, into each other – in order to come into being.



This page and opposite – *Darkroom*, 2008.
Courtesy: Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles.

ca What is the connection between the projected images and the sound? Can you talk about the sound component of the installation?

lep The three films are each comprised of two superimposed 16mm film loops with optical soundtracks: one edited from footage I shot in Germany with a German voiceover, the other from Los Angeles with an English one. I have always been influenced by the German fascination with the Southern California landscape. The geographical collapse effected by the superimposed films was a conscious attempt to reverse this gaze, to exoticize the German historical landscape by layering it with images of sunsets and palm trees. The voices emerged from the internal speakers of the projectors themselves, such that they were whispering bilingual sweet nothings to each other: phrases such as "Ich rufe die Jugend der Welt" (an inscription meaning "I call the youth of the world" found on the bell at Olympiastadium in Berlin) and "I want you inside me." Overlapping and echoing throughout the space, seemingly emanating from nowhere and everywhere at once, the voices embodied the projectors, occupying the structure without any need for actual bodies.

In addition to these soundtracks, I asked Eric D. Clark to produce a minimal techno mix specifically for the exhibition which was looping on speakers muffled by acoustic foam secreted away inside the scaffolding. The speakers were pressed up against the inner side of the waferboard such that the bass produced a physical vibration in the whole structure, a heartbeat inside a body you couldn't quite find your way into. It sounded more like the bathroom than the dancefloor of a club and this sense of being adjacent to the social, implicated but not enmeshed in it, was crucial.

ca The gallery windows were covered with pages from the Financial Times. Besides an obvious reference to the current financial crisis, what was the reason why you did that?

lep The salmon pink newsprint! It's such a sensitive color choice, full of finan-

cial affect. The color of the best sunrises. Or white flesh after being pinched. Embarrassed flesh. Blushing flesh. It's a threshold color. And it arrives on your doorstep around the same time that you might after a decent night out. Perfect for coming down as the sun goes up!

ca I remember there were some strange eyes carved through the scaffolding wood, so that the viewer could watch the film inside and at the same time see the structure. Does it have to do with a certain voyeurism in your work, which I also find in the film *Developer*?

lep The eyes cut into the board were the apertures through which the projectors sent light out of the structure and onto the walls. We are accustomed to conceiving of our eyes, like cameras, as receptive organs. But I wanted to emphasize the intense projective capacities of the eye and, by extension, the camera. Hindus pray with their eyes open to behold the divine. A good *darshan*, as it is called, is defined by a devotee's ability to meet the gaze of the deity. This is relevant to my films insofar as it privileges physical proximity between subject and object and acknowledges a kind of vision that emanates from the world of objects. My relationship to film is inextricable from this dialectic of the empirical and the transcendent.

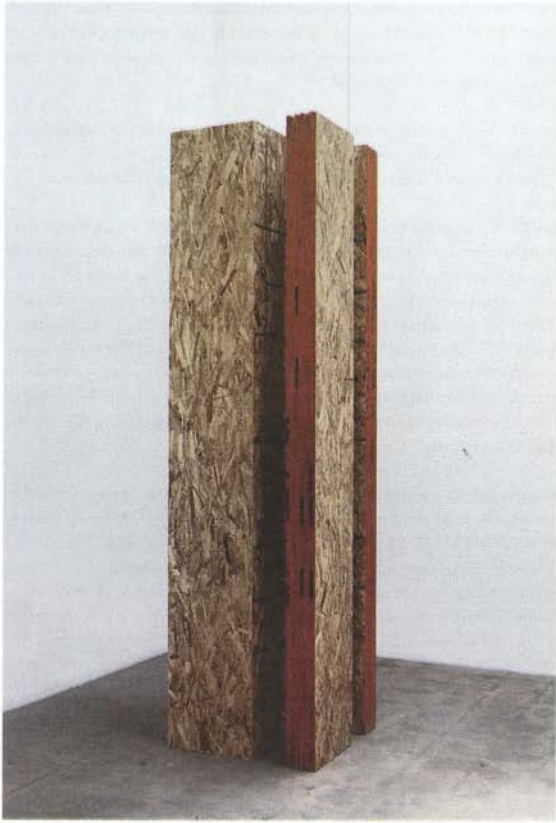
ca *Developer* is also a very disorienting film. The film is shot with an unsteady 16 mm camera in a pretty eccentric house, built as an eclectic style hovering between luxuriant Middle-Eastern influences and European extravaganza. The camera takes us on a journey, room after room, following decorative motifs and precious ornaments, to end up outside in the garden. Only in the very end, when the camera shoots the infinity pool overlooking a cityscape, you realize it's a house in Los Angeles. The lack of sound also adds a creepy atmosphere, as though the house had been abandoned. Can you tell us more about this project? What is the relationship with the rest of the show?

lep *Developer* tracks three simultaneous notions of "development" braided through the Beverly Hills home of a Palestinian-American real estate developer: film development, or the coming into being of a moving image; biographical development, or the journey between the moist phantasmatic origins invested in the Orientalist *hammam* to the wet modernist projection of the infinity pool; and finally, real estate development. During the height of the mortgage crisis, I found it much more compelling to trespass a developer's mansion than a foreclosed home. The twisting and turning movement of the camera in this single-channel 16mm film is the formal analog of the movement of the body through *Darkroom*. Yet both sites are haunted in their own way. While the mansion is an orgy of luxury objects and cultural styles, its emptiness gets at the abstraction at the heart of real estate. In short, it's *Last Year at Marienbad* meets *MTV Cribs*.

ca You recently did a solo show at Midway Contemporary Art in Minneapolis titled *Before the Sun*. Also in this show you integrated 16mm projections with a sculptural installation. One of the influences in the show were the Cahokia Mounds, these mysterious pre-Columbian archeological mound-like earthen formations near St Louis. Can you walk us through the show?



lep We painted the windows with clay so that when you stepped into the gallery you were enshrouded in darkness. At first you couldn't really see anything, but as your eyes began to adjust to the light cast by the projectors, the form of a rectangular two-stepped plaza emerged from the darkness. The plaza was made of rammed earth and rotated in relation to the space such that its faces indicated the cardinal directions and its corners almost touched the walls of the gallery. From the center of the plaza, emerged twin mirrorpane glass columns housing 16mm projectors. Images of the sunrise and sunset as seen from the apex of Cahokia's largest mound during the vernal equinox projected into the eastern and western corners of the gallery. If you followed



Above - Plinth for a Projector
(Berlin, 1936), 2009. Courtesy:
Richard Telles Fine Art,
Los Angeles.



Right - Paris, Las Vegas, 2009.
Courtesy: Richard Telles Fine Art,
Los Angeles.

Bottom - Leopoldville, 2009.
Courtesy: Richard Telles Fine Art,
Los Angeles.



the path of the film strips up and out of the projectors, you could discern that the loops wound their way around a two foot by two foot grid of magenta twine of the sort commonly used in archaeological digs.

ca The show hovers between a seemingly scientific reconstruction of an archeological site and a very personal, almost idiosyncratic reinterpretation of such suggestive and enigmatic site. I think this polarity is often discernible in your work, a sort of dialectic dialogue between real, historical or social facts and an irrational, suggestive component. Is that true?

lep Yes, but I would hesitate to call either pole "real." What we call reality is given shape the very dialectical oscillation between the historical and the contingent. The "personal" is also a very dubious category for me. "Personhood" is a humanist notion which represses the much more volatile possibilities of subjects or even objects to manifest intense singularities. Moments of encounter, with an arrowhead, a mirror or the sun, can unearth these possibilities, however fleetingly, in the subject.

ca The sun often appears in your films and installation. The whole installation at Midway is also arranged according to the actual position of the sun at Cahokia Mounds during the equinox. What does the sun symbolize for you? Why is it such a recurrent element in your research?

lep The sun was the first projector. It arranges us. The history of architecture records the many forms that our will to ascend has taken from the Mounds to the Pyramids to our skyscrapers. But if the sun still lords over us by day, perhaps it lords under us by night. This is the history of archaeology.

ca Architecture seems to play a big role in your artistic research. Did you study architecture in school? What are you seeking when exploring that field?

lep I am interested in the relationship between the architect and the plan as it provides a model of engaging history, politics and power. The architect begins by imposing a ground plan on the site from the impossibly ideal vantage point

of a solar god looking down on the earth. While this plan fundamentally shapes the experience of the building, it cannot appear to the subject as such. It is the tacit agreement or open secret that lies at the heart of the state and citizenship. *Plinth for a Projector* (Berlin, 1936) addressed this dynamic most succinctly. Made entirely out of laminated waferboard salvaged from *Darkroom*, what appears to be an eight foot tall column with recessed spaces, in fact takes the shape of a deformed swastika when seen from above, a vantage point unavailable to the viewer.

ca Do you think your practice as a filmmaker is influenced by the avant-garde cinema, through the work of artists such Stan Vanderbeek for instance, who expanded the notion of cinema to a three-dimensional, deeply immersive level?

lep Not especially. Growing up in Southern California in close proximity to the immersive spectacles and ride-films of Universal Studios, Disneyland and Las Vegas, cinema always felt expanded.

ca You are currently having your first New York show at the Whitney. What are you exhibiting there?

lep For some time now, I've been fascinated by the security bollards one finds around important buildings in downtown Chicago. They are almost like empty stone pedestals whose artifacts have long been snatched away, descending deep into the ground for resilience against ramming. I find them archaeological in the sense that they form sections that reveal strata of fear and insecurity. The archaeologists at Cahokia have also found evidence of defensive stockade walls that circumscribed the ancient city. If *Before the Sun* was a monument to the murky origins of our shared solar unconscious, *Unearth*, the new work on view at the Whitney, represents a late moment from the same era, a moment defined by anxiety around disappearance and collapse. I've created a series of rammed earth columns embedded with strata of shells, magenta twine and 16mm film arranged in a line running from true north to south. Two columns encased in glass project film loops. You know they call downtown Chicago "The Loop" too. I really like that.

DI CECILIA ALEMANI

Negli spazi espositivi, Karthik Pandian costruisce strutture invasive dai cui interstizi promanano stratificate pellicole in loop. Le architetture sono anche il soggetto esplorato in alcuni suoi film dove il movimento della cinepresa mima quello del corpo, serpeggiando attraverso le sale. Cecilia Alemani ha incontrato l'artista a New York, in occasione della sua mostra al Whitney, scoprendo come i suoi lavori riescano, attraverso l'architettura, a parlare di molte cose, dal potere del sole a quello degli uomini.



This page, from left - *Broken Sun III, II and IV*, 2010. Courtesy: Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles.

cecilia alemani Cominciamo da *Darkroom*, la tua prima mostra monografica, alla galleria Telles di Los Angeles, nel 2009. Hai trasformato la galleria in una sorta di labirinto/club: una grande struttura in legno invadeva lo spazio, lasciando piccoli interstizi inorno cui lo spettatore poteva vagare, mentre coppie di proiettori 16 mm annidati dentro la struttura proiettavano film sulle pareti. Puoi spiegare qual era l'idea alla base della mostra? In particolare m'interessa la scala dell'oggetto, la sua forza ostruente e disorientante e la scelta dei materiali.

karthik pandian *Darkroom* parlava fondamentalmente di accoppiamenti: dalla mia ricerca sull'accoppiamento, inteso in senso letterale, dai corpi negli angoli bui dei techno club tedeschi ai proiettori appaiati e angolati in maniera tale da produrre flussi asincroni di immagini sovrapposte; dall'identificazione, proposta da Eijzenstejn, tra montaggio e funzione copulativa dell'ideogramma giapponese (piangere è una fusione di occhio e acqua) all'"umidità" delle immagini che s'intravedevano nelle proiezioni (fiumi, oceani, fontane); dall'incessante iterazione dei sei filmati, che scorrevano su bobine sospese dall'alto, al percorso

ciclico ricavato lungo il perimetro della galleria dalla struttura che riempie quasi completamente lo spazio, senza toccarne le pareti. Qui la materialità del film e dell'architettura è sospesa in una sorta di movimento oscillatorio. Nonostante la sua apparente aggressività a livello di dimensioni e di occupazione dello spazio, l'intervento architettonico assume la forma di una fortificazione difensiva, la cui provvisorietà è sottolineata dai materiali di costruzione: ponteggi per l'edilizia rivestiti di economici pannelli truciolari. Nel frattempo i film si fanno carico della monumentalità tipica dell'architettura, ripetendosi in modo singolarmente perpetuo, alla maniera di una fontana. In mezzo a tutti questi accoppiamenti c'è un appello a scomparire - nel buio, tra monumenti in rovina, in edifici costruiti per metà, l'uno nell'altro - per poter vedere la luce.

ca Qual è il legame tra le immagini proiettate e il suono? Puoi parlare della componente sonora dell'installazione?

lep I tre film sono formati ciascuno dalla sovrapposizione di due film in 16mm