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**Between Black Out and Whitewashing
Interview with Gautam Kansara by Gianni Jetzer**

Gianni Jetzer: You were born in London to parents of Indian descent, moved to the United States at age 5, settling in the suburbs of New York, then to California at age 15, and then to Brooklyn, NY at 22. After 16 years in Brooklyn you eventually ended up in Zurich, Switzerland. How has this ongoing migration influenced your work?

Gautam Kansara: When my work was first developing and evolving the one constant was my grandparent's flat in London. As I moved west and then east, I kept returning to this flat, to congregate with family and to film our interactions. The flat was my constant stage set, studio, and "home" until a few years after my grandparent's died and the flat was sold off. The flat was also a window or a portal into a modicum of Indian culture, family history, myth, and drama, all of which were irresistible as a focus for my work. But despite all the changes of location, and in spite of the political landscape, I'll always feel American more than anything else.

GJ: One of America's most famous newspapers "The New York Times" has become an important source for your work. You have told me a funny episode about how your dad used to challenge you as a boy to make you read the newspaper in order to sharpen your judgement. Can you tell me how your perception of the Times changed over the course of time and how you developed a sheer obsession with it? What does it stand for today when Europeans no longer dream of America?

GK: My love affair with the Times is a complicated web of good and bad memories. I really resented the Times for years, because it was linked to me not living up to the expectations of my father. But when I moved to NYC my mom got me a subscription without asking me, and it just showed up at my apartment every morning. I'm a creature of habit really, and the daily delivery created an addiction. Grabbing the paper and reading it on the subway, opened and spread like a barrier to the crowd was also somehow empowering, probably because I was one of the few with physical papers. But the Times is flawed like all media sources, it positions itself as a bastion of fact and objectiveness, but it can't escape its own bias. My mom has moved away from it because she sees it as too pro-Israel, which is clear. One source is never enough to get to the facts of what actually happened in any given event. You need Fox News, CNN, Al Jazeera, Der Spiegel, BBC, Reuters, Slate, The Guardian, La Monde, RT etc. But who really has the time for this. This type of analysis is a full time job, and I can't really trust any of the pundits to do the work for me. And so I'm largely ignorant of the facts but heavily influenced by the biased truth. We know so much about so little. Whatever we do know is suspect. And it will all be largely forgotten and replaced the next time I refresh my feed.

GJ: The way you materialize the Times in your work has taken many different forms, all of them seem to focus on the front page and the boldest headlines it has to offer. There is one constant in these works: printed news are in an unstable state, oscillating, fluctuating, even at risk of self-erasure. Can you explain this ambivalence in your depiction of news and their presence?

GK: Indeed these words oscillating, fluctuating, unstable resonate for me, and in one way or another have always been central to my practice, even before the news obsession. One of my first real art projects involved documenting bars and clubs in the lower east side and chinatown in NYC, and using very long exposures to emphasize the transient nature of the spaces, ever changing, where as soon as you and your friends move on, another group takes your place. With the Times it's similar, even the bold-faced headlines, seemingly so "important" and relevant still have a short life span, they'll still all fade away, perhaps into history, but more likely they'll be recontextualized and practically erased by the time they make it there. I'm also using the deterioration of these major headlines to point to the blackout of "other" news that would receive prominence in some progressive alternate reality. But in the here and now it's just a lapse in coverage of the disenfranchised, translating to even further political disadvantage. The fading, the transience, the erasure all alludes to the limits of absorbing information when the constant flow scrambles our perception, and to the fragility of our cultural and personal memory, which often results in a kind of whitewashing of history.

GJ: In one of your recent works entitled "More past the better" you added a soundtrack that brings back the family aspect in your work. Since a vacation with your father, mother, and brother in Turkey you communicate frequently through Whatsapp and often discuss world politics between California (parents), London (brother), and you (Switzerland). While the front page of the New York Times is gently dissolving through a computer animation, we hear your voice reciting and at times singing the family chat. You use a high pitch voice that is reminiscent of sacral music. Can you tell me more about this work?

GK: Whenever my family is together, physically or virtually, the topic is invariably politics and current events, and how history has shaped the present. There is little room for normal chit-chat, or for bonding through inquiring about each other's lives. Debating is how we are intimate together, and our debating style is rooted in my parents education at Cambridge, where they learned to have respect for ideas, but to be vicious in asserting themselves, and to throw intellectual spears at the ideas of their opponents. But so the chat started as a simple way to communicate on vacation, but soon after just became our forum for debate, the place where we can foment the family argument. Working with the chat, reciting it, singing it, actually allows me to appreciate the rigor of it because I am at a distance, I can step back from the competition and understand the point of view rather than just defending and asserting myself. The tone of the singing is intended to contribute to the video's feeling of being simultaneously soothing and disturbing, an intellectual comfort through the dark times. The chat content is dramatic, provocative, and biting. Recently about Trump getting covid there was this exchange: "Hopefully they can use 'quarantine' as a way to lock him up in a tower like Napoleon and throw away the key." "Well he has the best medical care on the planet and will survive just fine, and be in a position to say he's a Nietzschean Superman and that he and his supporters have nothing to fear from Covid."

GJ: Optimistic by nature I must admit that I'm slightly worried about the global crisis as it appears in ecological disasters, the breach of human rights, the digital surveillance of citizens, algorithmic manipulation etc. In its use of media content your work implicates a political dimension. How do you position yourself as an artist in regards to politics? Do you believe in political art?

GK: I'm hopeful, despite Obama, and his allegiance to the status quo. Politically, my family and I are not so far apart, but we still find a massive amount of detail to disagree on. Part of this is purely devil's advocate, but details are important. Terribly so much of my lens on the political world is viewed through the election in the United States. Against Trump is a given, but I was very against Bloomberg too, and Kamala Harris. He's right of center at best, and the center moved to the right decades ago. And while she's evolved from her prosecutorial days to be decidedly more progressive, her Brahmin roots clash with how to deal with the palpable caste system in the US. Warren could have been the one, at least my one, but I have already voted Biden/Harris. I'm loathe to actually believe in anything but generational change though, and my experience arguing with conservatives makes me wary that change can happen any other way. But yes, political art is important and necessary, but not impactful in a transformative way. It's a reflection, but not an instrument to convince. The audience is all on board already, at least they think they are. In reality, they are all voting with self interest at the fore. Civil War 2.0 may be on the horizon, which would clearly be catastrophic, but even in this eventuality I will reserve some optimism for the structural change that may only be possible by burning it all down. And by it, I'm referring to neoliberalism, and the capitalistic dogma of economic growth as a necessity.

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The interview is condensed and was led in written form.
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