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My Reality is Different



Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests.

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair”. Charles Dickens described in *A Tale of Two Cities*, an age of radical opposites taking place at the same time.

More than ever in this period of the 21st century, we see ourselves in a situation of radical opposites. Though these opposites are determined by human factors, they are not determined or in control by the common man... or should I say woman. Yet, they are the ones who suffer the most.

My latest artwork is called *My Reality is Different* (Fig. 1-3), a nine channel video animation chamber made as part of London’s National Gallery first Contemporary Fellowship. In this I overwrite with my iPad animation drawings a selection of their painting collection and add a series of portraits of the subaltern caught in the worldwide financial web. The National Gallery is a collection of about 2,600 West European paintings by 750 artists. These artworks tell stories from the 13th to the 19th century; biblical, mythical, historical. They show us the world from the point of view of Western patriarchy, the clergy, the royalty, and often colonial view, where woman, the subaltern and nature are suppressed, as if it were a God given birthright.



Fig. 1

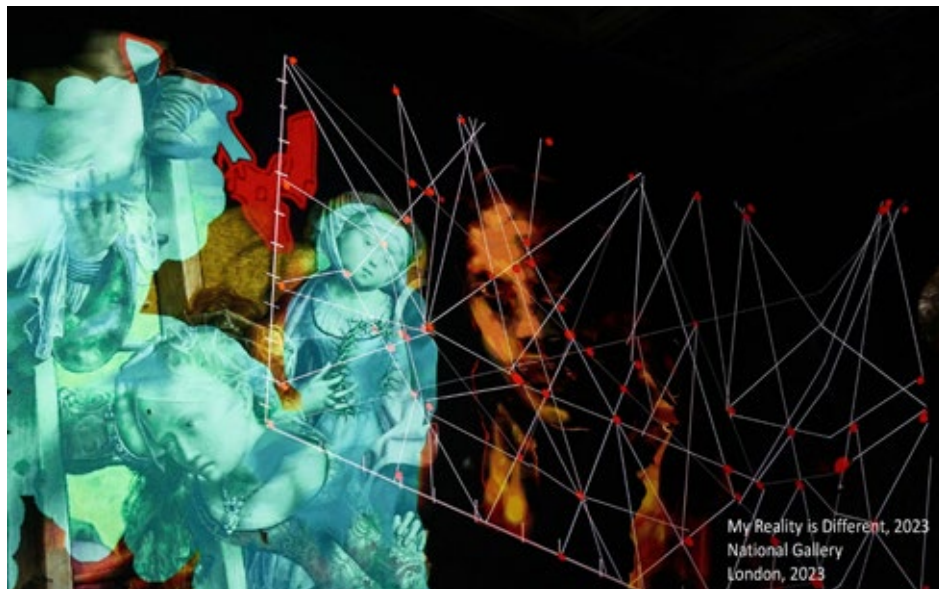


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

By playing the nine channels, each of different duration as overlapping images, *My Reality is Different* is a dynamic *palimpsest* with endless combinations of images, which makes visible an alternative nonlinear part of the human brain. With this experimental art form, I address the spectators as an 'active audience', where they become dynamic co-creators and co-producers of meaning, rather than passive receptors. *My Reality is Different*, with 250,000 visitors in three months this spring, became the most visited contemporary art exhibition at the National Gallery. The virtual graffitiing on these masterpieces was both a critique and a homage. Gabriele Finaldi, the director of the National Gallery, described *My Reality is Different* as "a constant destroying and rediscovering as a counter-action that what's gone before. Such robust critique keeps the collection alive", he said.

My Reality is Different, this could have been the overall title of my art in the last 50 years. This not only because as a female artist coming from a refugee family, I do experience time and again reality differently as it unfolds and is politicised and historicized. But most importantly that I wanted with my art is to make a difference in that reality. The artist's antenna works like a Cassandra, predicting how the future *Form* will come out of current *Attitudes*. This does not imply that my antenna works like a doomsday oracle, although my quest is to put inherited iconographies and stereotypes of culture under intense pressure. My critically charged art can be described as excess, exceeding the conventional, going beyond the boundaries of legitimised narrative. Once caught in the seduction of its beauty, the artwork sets up a stream of consciousness, one thing telescoping into the other, recreating the complexity of how thought, emotion and memory work at any given moment. Relieving anxiety and decreasing the pain, with as a backdrop the fundamental flaws of human nature with its capacity for acts of unimaginable horror committed in the name of ideals. As Lewis Carroll wrote: "Imagination is the only weapon in the war against reality".



Fig. 4

My story started with a drawing, a line drawn in a few weeks by a man called Radcliffe. Commissioned by the Parliament of the United Kingdom in 1947, it was decided that British India in a Partition was to be split up into two new sovereign states of Pakistan and India. Pakistan was intended as a Muslim homeland while India remained secular. And with this rather simple action, the drawing of a line, the future of millions was decided; a whole subcontinent, creating two nations with traumas, the wounds of which would last till the present day. For the 50 years of Independence

exhibition, *Mappings: Shared Histories... A Fragile Self*, I made from a quilt that belonged to my grandmother a history canvas titled *Excavated Images* (Fig. 5). The quilt had served as a sack for the family when they escaped to Bombay as refugees of Partition. I stained the fabric with paint in the colours of sweat, blood and body ooze and combined this with an archaeology of personal images, memories and emotions—the tragic moments in the history of this young nation. In order to involve the public, I provided golden safety pins with sacred “wish” threads attached to them, to be pinned to the quilt. This combines a Muslim and a Hindu religious tradition into a single one, melding two customs. Starting in New Delhi, the exhibition traveled to Karachi and by the time *Excavated Images* was shown in Bombay, it was completely covered with pins on both sides.



Fig. 5

At the time my father was still in Karachi in British India, my mother noticed in a newspaper an advertisement for a lawyer’s job at Tata Airlines. Seeing the opportunity, she took the initiative to phone and explain the situation and offered to come herself to the interview to stand in for her husband. To his surprise, when my father landed in Bombay, he was expected to go directly to their offices in Calcutta, now called Kolkata. In Calcutta, ours was a very modest life, with one room divided by a curtain. My mother took me to see children’s movies on Saturday mornings and as well to her voluntary work at the Bengali refugee camps. My father’s job opened up the world as my mother and I could fly once per year anywhere with free tickets from what became Air India International. At the age of 12, my first international journey was to Japan, followed soon by Paris and London. Here started a lifelong process of discovering how visual language travels and how it takes root in different cultures, and trying to make sense of this puzzle called human life.



Fig. 6

Drawing gives you an instrument of observation to get a grip on outer reality, as I was taught during my biology lessons, when learning to minutely observe dissections of plants, insects and small animals. A few years later, on my journey to Kenya, where I, for the first time, was confronted with racial discrimination, I learned that even more importantly, drawing works as well for ordering an inner reality. Drawing became a life-essential way of relating to the outer world and the inner world, without which I could not do a day in my life. An inner reality of fears, anxieties, uncertainties, a reality with which more than half of the world lives and which seems not to be understood or acknowledged by the ones in power. Of course, my father being practical, and having experienced that the family lost everything during Partition, wanted me to study law, as he had done. After all, if for a second time we had to flee, what could we take to the next country, nothing more than what we had in our minds.



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

To become an artist, was no choice. . . It was my only way to make sense of life. Thanks to the convincing words and loyal support of my mother, I went to the J.J. School of Art in Bombay for the period 1964–1969. Old fashioned British oil painting oriented education, with a completely outdated library from which one was not even allowed to borrow books. I would rather spend my time next door at the School of Architecture, with deeply engaged students full of ideas related to Bauhaus and social architecture. Or at the Bhulabhai Memorial Institute, by coincidence next-door to the Sindhi refugee colony where my parents lived, where I was lucky to get a studio already in 1964. I became friends with the now legendary senior artists Gaitonde, Tyeb Mehta and M.F. Husain. Every week we went to see new Indian regional films and alternative European cinema. Gaitonde generously lent me his books on Western art history, Indian philosophy and Zen Buddhism. In my spare time, I worked in the same building as a volunteer for the theatre director Satyadev Dubey, whom I assisted with making posters, costumes and postcards for invitees. From Dubey's plays, I learned the value of reusing old epics, myths and stories to make them germane to the contemporary moment.

In the same locality, a hundred meters to the left of my parents' home, the artist Akbar Padamsee started the *Vision Exchange Workshop* in 1969. For this Padamsee selected a small group of artists and filmmakers, wanting them to work and discuss the new mass media like film and photography, as this was material that would make the future. Being invited as the youngest and only female, just after I obtained a diploma in fine arts at the J.J. School of Art, the *Vision Exchange Workshop* felt like a dream. Before even the first film camera arrived, I already made a series of large camera-less photograms (Fig. 9), which I continued in 1970; imaginary blueprints of an ideal city plan for a modern India. With a size of 96×73 cm, these photograms were unusually large for those times, that allowed me to exhibit them in relation to my abstract paintings.



Fig. 9

At the *Vision Exchange Workshop* in the summer of 1969, in a period of six weeks nonstop work, I finished the painstaking and complicated stop motion animation *Dream Houses* (Fig. 10). The inspiration for this animation came from Lázló Moholy-Nagy, who believed in the potential of art as a vehicle for social transformation, and from the colour theories of Johannes Itten, but most importantly from the Indian architect Charles Correa with his visionary and humanistic ideas for the urban poor. I was the most prolific member, and made additionally a series of short black and white experimental films on what it felt to be a young woman in Bombay. These early film works on the female body puzzled my male colleagues, and according to them, I was wasting my time.



Fig. 10

On a scholarship in 1970–72, Paris became the university of my life. Here, in contrast to the art scene in Bombay, engagement in politics was very much part of the scene. Still under the influence of '68, I participated in mass demonstrations and was inspired at the Sorbonne by the lectures of Noam Chomsky, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Leiris, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. At the Cité Universitaire, intense intellectual discussions focused on the Third World, colonial and post-colonial studies and anti-imperial struggles. Meeting young filmmakers at the Cinémathèque Française, such as Alain Resnais, Jean-Luc Godard, William Klein and Chris Marker made me aware of film as a 'prise de conscience', a political awareness. All this together helped me to develop an eye for observing the reality of my homeland from the outside.

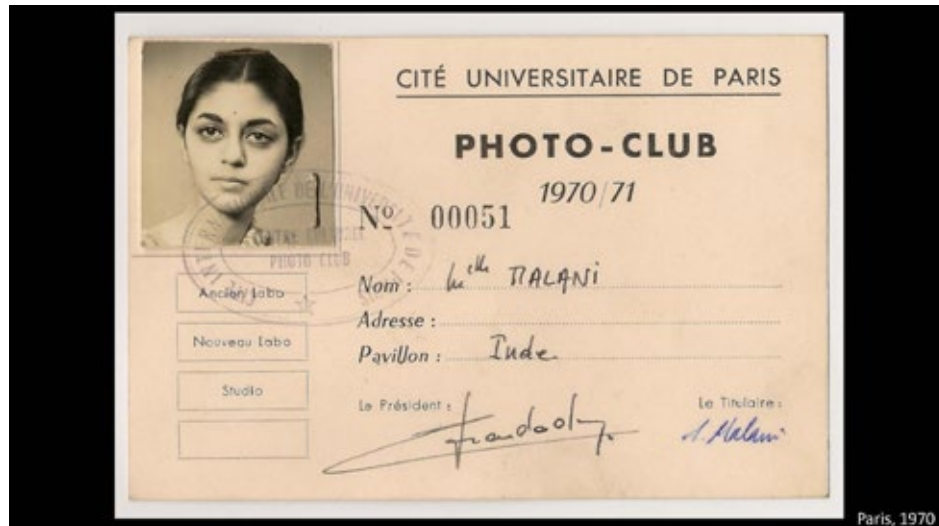


Fig. 11

Paris was very attractive as part of the West that ruled the hegemony of contemporary art. It inspired me to make a new series of photo collages (Fig. 12) and write several scripts for short films and film sculptures. But instead of staying on, I returned to Bombay, motivated to contribute as an artist to the progress of the young Indian nation.



Fig. 12

Coming from a region in the world where many women face difficulty in achieving social advancement, I continued my series of films. This started with a documentary project in a Muslim slum in the area called Bandra in Bombay (Fig. 13). The film was intended as a conscience raising project that could travel from one slum to another, to make their inhabitants aware of their rights. The project was never finished. After months of work, one morning, I arrived at a completely empty space. The city municipality had overnight bulldozed the whole area.



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

In the same year I made the black and white film *Taboo* (Fig. 15) in Rajasthan, while assisting the film director Mani Kaul on his shoot for the film *Duvidha*. *Taboo* deals with the unnoticed discrimination against women in India, what still is being practised and justified by caste and religion, especially in certain orthodox communities.



Fig. 15

One might wonder, “What is the *Taboo* about?” The answer lies in the strict separation in certain castes between what women are allowed to do in the weaving process. It is an absolute taboo for these women to touch the loom. As such, women are excluded from the most important and creative part of the process. A metaphor that even today stands for the discrimination that women face.

Like in the words of Charles Dickens, already the late sixties and early seventies in India showed that radical opposites were taking place. The Nehruvian period came to an end, and it became clear that most of the utopian dreams could never be realised by the common family. The old dominating factors of religion, caste, gender and class determined your life.

Hence, I decided in 1976 to add another film to my animation *Dream Houses* of 1969, intended to be screened next to each other as a double film projection and installation. This film installation *Utopia* (Fig. 16) shows a young woman in black and white film who realises that these new buildings she is looking at will never be within her reach. After a spring of hope for India, the winter of despair had set in. Rejected and ignored by the Vision Exchange Workshop, these experimental films surfaced again in 2012 when I moved my studio. Their value as early experimental socio-political engaged film was finally acknowledged, and are now in a digitalised format in museum collections around the world, like the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Centre Pompidou in Paris, M+ in Hong Kong, and KNMA in New Delhi.



Fig. 16

From 1978 to 2003, I no longer lived in the elite Warden Road, but had my studio in the bustling area of the electric wholesale market in Lohar Chawl in Bombay. It was a radical socio-cultural change, where life on the streets became an obsession, where daily workers found their home and family life as pavement dwellers. In the late eighties, to search out new artistic expressions was a dire need. The Indian art scene was in an ivory tower, catering largely to the elite, with no connection with the nation's drastically changing socio-political reality. How to confront the bourgeois audience and shake them up from their equanimity? How to bring the voice of the voiceless, the predicaments of the oppressed to a larger audience, within India and internationally, in the Western art world but as well beyond the West?

Invited to exhibit in 1991 at the posh south Bombay Jehangir Art Gallery, I wanted the audience to become part of this other world. *Alleyway of Lohar Chawl* (Fig. 17-18) became my first installation/shadow play, with ink drawings on five polyester sheets, hanging as scrolls in a staggered zigzag formation, becoming a see-through, walk through installation.

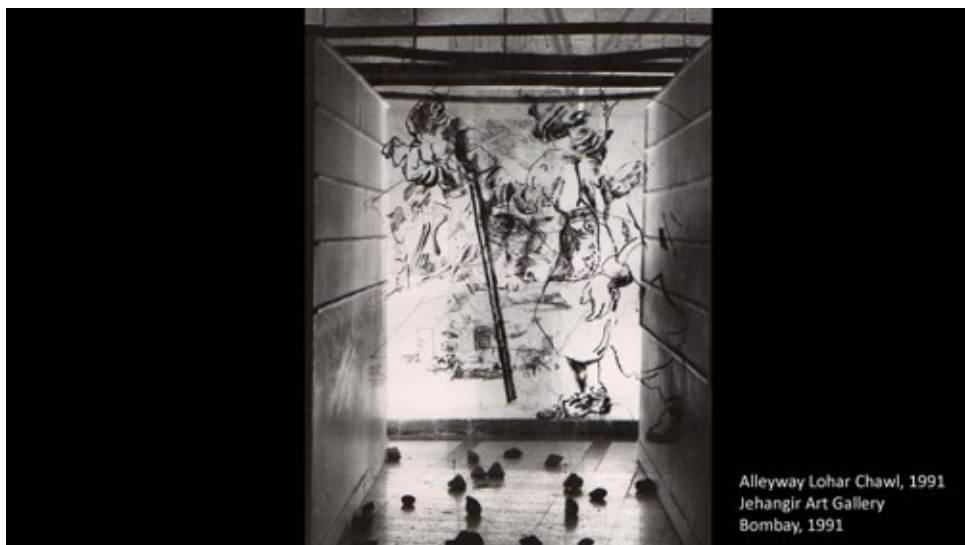


Fig. 17



Fig. 18

The palimpsest images appear and disappear like pale ghosts of a dehumanised world. Here, one was encompassed, could not escape it, as one walked through. Here, the shadow of a lower strata would touch your body. *Alleyway of Lohar Chawl* was not a painting that one could observe from a safely distant chair.

Socio-politically engaged art like this continued a year later with my wall drawings *City of Desires* (Fig. 19), which I referred to in a newspaper from 1992 as an “impermanent site-specific installation”. For this, I took over a white-cube gallery in South Bombay as an open studio where I worked in situ. The exigencies of the threat to democratic freedom led me and other female artists to look for new materials and new forms.



Fig. 19

City of Desires became a series which I have continued to make since 30 years. Within India, for instance, at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art in New Delhi and internationally at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Centre Pompidou in Paris, and Castello di Rivoli (Fig. 20), with the most recent ones this year in Montreal and Seoul. Revisiting subjects is typical of my art, as I work in series on specific subjects often over long periods of time, as I feel unable to contain it in one single work, or when the subject becomes topical again, or when I feel I have to add a dimension.



Fig. 20

These wall drawings have, at the end of the exhibition period, different Erasure Performances, which are not just a destruction but an exercise in memory, as this is all what is left over.

However, this Erasure Performance is not communicated to the museum or the public in advance. At the Musée Cantonal des Beaux Arts in Lausanne, the audience was surprised, expected to see a performance when they were all invited to perform the erasure themselves (Fig. 21). Parents and children stood next to international curators and city civil servants.



Fig. 21

At the Centre Pompidou in Paris, a thank you public ceremony was organised where the full exhibition team, including the director, got a bouquet of red roses, after which they were asked to their surprise to use these same roses for the Erasure Performance (Fig. 22).



Fig. 22

In the nineties an inner drive to connect to larger audiences led to working in experimental theatre in collaboration with performers and theatre directors, which resulted in *Medeamaterial* in 1993, and *The Job* in 1997 (Fig. 23-24). At the same time, in November 1995, the newly elected Shiv Sena-led government renamed the city of Bombay to Mumbai after the city's patron deity, Goddess Mumbadevi.



Fig. 23



Fig. 24

These theatre plays, explored new artistic expression and experiments, with contemporary versions of the Greek Tragedies and Bertolt Brecht's 'epic theatre', but were put into an Indian setting, as I believe in the universality of themes such as conflict, reconciliation, oppression, dream and myth.

Although a great success, unfortunately, these theatre plays could not travel internationally. Therefore, I changed the concept of the play by going one step further, capturing the actors on camera so that with projections I could show them everywhere. I called this new format 'video-plays', a format which would help me further with the decentralisation of art. During a six month residency at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in 1999/2000, I made the video-play *Hamletmachine*, in collaboration with the Butoh dancer Nobuo Harada (Fig. 25). His body as a canvas soaked up history with projections of newly made and historical footage.



Fig. 25

Hamletmachine is originally an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by the German playwright Heiner Müller. It consists of four video projections in a dark theatrical setting, with three screens forming a large triptych and the fourth screen consisting of a thick layer of a salt bed on the floor, a reference to Gandhi's salt march (Fig. 26).

For me, the Hamlet character resembled at that time not only the state of India, a country in transition, undecided about its political and economic stance, but as an universal play, asking questions and expressing traumas that concern all of contemporary humankind.

Thanks to its universal character and due to its digital format, *Hamletmachine* as an experimental video-play traveled in the last two decades to more than 15 countries spread over four continents.



Fig. 26

A step further with these video-plays became the large-scale-outdoor open-air public video presentations. As, for instance, the commission in 2014 in Edinburgh for the commemoration of the beginning of World War I, projected on the entire South and West façade of the National Gallery.

Just like the mural paintings by Giotto in the churches or in the Buddhist caves in Aurangabad, these outdoor multi-narrative video-plays are meant to be seen as a collective experience.

As *In Search of Vanished Blood* (Fig. 27-29) was screened directly after the ceremonial Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo, it was attended by massive crowds that, for the occasion, could take over the traffic-free streets along the Scottish National Gallery. With Cassandra's head floating over the walls, this video work combined archival footage of World War I and the monstrosities of World War II with phantasmagorical animations of a future. A military heritage, one which is connected to Britain's imperial incursions in South Asia.



Fig. 27

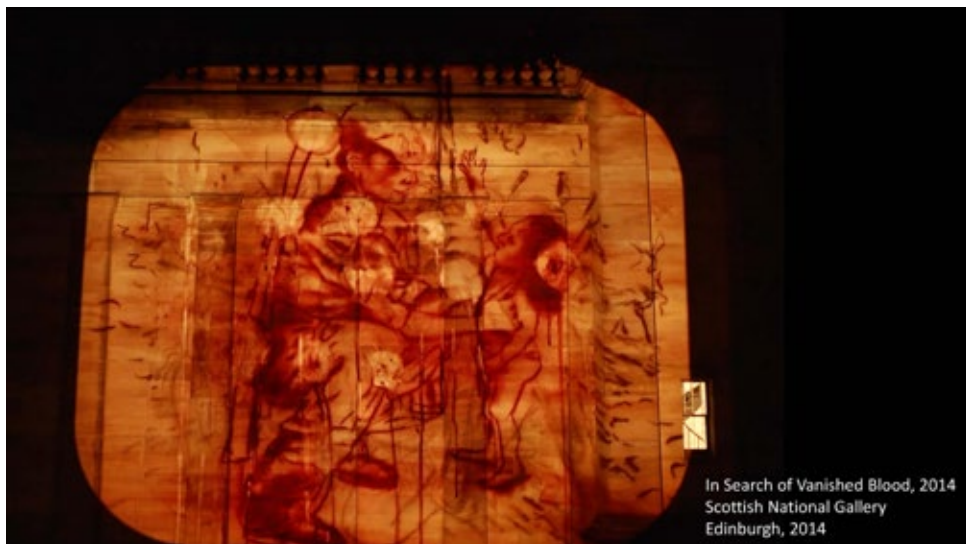


Fig. 28



Fig. 29

Sometimes it so happens that in the constant process of experimenting, you find a solution in the combination of two completely different ways of working. To find a solution for the actor to change her costume on stage during the play *The Job*, I came up with the reverse painted transparent cylinders that could go over the actor, so she would become a different person. Pulling these cylinders up and down created intriguing shadows, which led to my shadow plays, such as *The Sacred and the Profane* (Fig. 30).



Fig. 30

Combining rotating reverse painted cylinders with video as light source became what I call 'video/shadow plays'. This new type of work has become my most successful art form in which I could make a tangible, different kind of working of the mind, beyond the Western linear view. The multi layering palimpsest created spaces of wonder, appealing to memory while referencing epic mythological narratives, allegorical fictions, and political exigencies. It is this radically inventive art practice which became my international signature, especially when shown at DOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel in 2012 (Fig. 31).



Fig. 31

And a few years later at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in the exhibition *Scenes for a New Heritage* (Fig. 32).



Fig. 32

Or at the solo exhibition *Vision in Motion*, at the inauguration of the M+ Museum in Hong Kong, where it had 1.2 million visitors in a period of 11 months (Fig. 33).



Fig. 33

My latest game changer happened in 2017 when I was introduced to the iPad by my architect/artist friend Salim Currimjee. It gave me a studio on the move where I could get a grip on things that agitated me by making drawings as Notebook animations on daily politics, other people's writings, and even mundane aspects of life, which I might have experienced. I could question them, to show a different angle as a protest, or even as a joke. Drawing them directly on the iPad with my index finger, not with an Apple pencil, there is a sensitivity with the fingertip, which is erotic, raw. There is something very direct about this process of drawing, rubbing, scratching, erasing, to do with the messing around in one's mind. I feel like a woman with thoughts and fantasies shooting from my head.

In a period of less than five years I made the images and the video for more than 100 animations. Exhibiting no longer depended on galleries or museums with long term plannings, as I presented these animations like 'thought bubbles' directly and for free on Instagram, where thousands of people are following them.

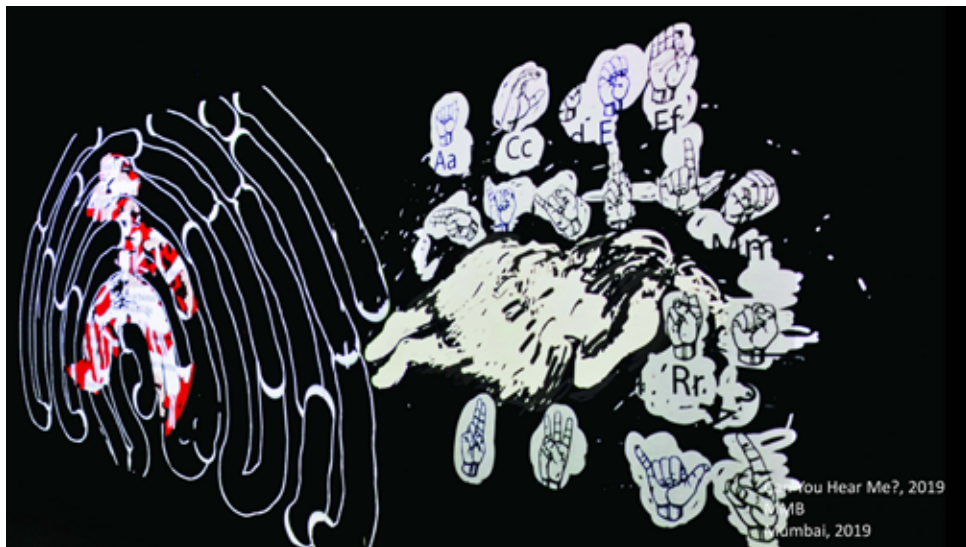


Fig. 34

The appreciation was such that I decided to put the animations together in a format of an ‘animation chamber’, where they become like video graffiti on the walls. An animation chamber as an agora, where one could discuss the topics amongst the viewers, as a cultural counter to the climate of intolerance. As such, *Can You Hear Me?* (Fig. 35) was exhibited for 11 months in 2020 at the Whitechapel Gallery in London and became so popular that in a period of three years it was shown as an installation in 12 different museums around the world.



Fig. 35

To my surprise, the quality of these digital animation files was such that it even gave me the opportunity to go on the street level and fill complete buildings. For example, this year, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts invited me for a façade commission for which I made the animation *Ballad of a Woman* (Fig. 36), inspired on a poem by the Polish Nobel Prize winner Wislawa Szymborska. The audience feedback was encouraging with works like these. Shown over six months, the characters from its epics meet and merge with multicultural voices and global feminist concerns.



Fig. 36

[Endnote]

My Reality is Different: for the majority of humankind, the quotidian experience of reality in the past and in the present are different from those who dominate and manipulate world views in an oppressive manner; but the paradigm for a future could be Different. At the age of 77, I am still very interested in alternative systems of critical thought and passionate about pioneering artistic expression which can touch our spirits.

I feel art has a function more than ever, to return us to that part of the human we deny, the part that thwarts our capacity to make sense of what we see and hear. Now more than ever, it is important to question and try to understand the vagaries and demands of cultural translation and to create in order that oppositional voices are not feared, degraded, dismissed, but valued.

Kazuo Inamori, the initiator of the Kyoto Prize, was convinced that the future of humanity can be assured only when there is a balance between scientific development and the enrichment of the human spirit. In that line of thought, I want to thank all my fellow laureates of the Kyoto Prize. Your contribution over the decades has been such an inspiration for the world. You are the spring of hope, after the winter of despair. Thank you.



Fig. 37

You can watch the interview video after the commemorative lecture on the Kyoto Prize YouTube channel. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Y1W32MkmBE&list=PLmPcz49VTBBerReYZr-IE9kPl7SFvB3_F&index=8)