

OMAR CHOWDHURY

THE CREATIVE MIND AND THE COMMONPLACE

An Essay by
Mark Gisbourne

FORM AS BEING 10 September —
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Solo Exhibition

OMAR CHOWDHURY: THE CREATIVE MIND AND THE COMMONPLACE

Mark Gisbourne

To speak of cultural rituals and their ritualization as the commonplace may at first appear as a contradictory use of terminology, since the manifestation of rituals most generally infer specific seasonal or temporal periods of discrete celebratory engagement. However, and in contradistinction, the films of Australian-Bengali artist Omar Chowdhury are imbued with a strange sense of exacting if non-specific a-temporality, that is notwithstanding the many hours of film shot and the subsequent protracted editing that has taken place. Whether dealing with aspects of ritual celebration and spiritual practices, or simply observing the urban and rural daily labours of Bangladesh today, the internality of Chowdhury's filmed subject matter at any given moment is pregnant with a sense of enacted and immediate presence. It is this aspect or the immediacy of a feeling presence that has led the artist filmmaker Chowdhury to argue that his films represent a naturally imbued sense or existent state of being as form.¹ Yet this remains nonetheless a problematic and contentious assertion, namely to argue

that the synthesised medium of film can create a truly affective state of ontological being—particularly as it mediates inferred presence by non-presence — through the inevitable material absence of the filmed participants.² In this punctilious and material sense it conflicts with the reality principle that is understood to be implicit to the philosophical ontology of being. Yet in films such as *Torsions I, II* and *Locus I and II*, the filmmaker Chowdhury intensely engages with a psycho-phenomenological use of space — and compressed human proximities — for the purposes of creating richly layered and diverse multi-sensory intensities of emotion through pictorial image saturation. It is for this reason Chowdhury's use of the term 'being as form' is placed in an interpretive context that asserts a phenomenological argument, whereby the effects or sensory experiences, mediated through simple and immediate conceptual structures, rely on an inference and aesthetics of continuous affection in order to ground themselves.³ It is this that justifies his films and their status as an artistic project — since aesthetics in the modern age has become



Video Still, *Torsions I, II*, 2014, 1 channel, HD ProRes, 1.78:1, Colour, Stereo

synonymous with the philosophy of art and its practices — and it is what makes his films distinct from ethnographic investigations or anthropological documentaries.

Films like *Torsions I, II* and *Locus I and II* intensify an intended visual sense of optical and philosophical aporia, (doubt, puzzlement or undecidability) which is to say that Chowdhury avers any determining narrative or diachronic structure save that of the visual sequencing brought about by the protracted editing of his many hours of footage.⁴ Through this use of intensification, as Chowdhury has often intimated, there is a pursuit of what he calls a form (i.e., being) of personal ‘transcendence’ as self-enlightenment. It is a process that is searching for how to

live that forms a temporal mirror and/or aspiration of how his and other lives might be lived. It is for this reason the purported religious truths or espoused faiths of the festivals depicted are not the filmmaker’s primary concern or point of interest, save that of the vivification and energies expressed by the participating religious celebrants. It is for this very reason that I have not immediately and first off launched into descriptions of the different religious celebrations and practices that Chowdhury has chosen to film — and this is the case notwithstanding his own ethnographical Bengali associations. It is also important to stress that the viewer of his films becomes a figure of simile, a potential witness, and is not seen as someone who has to be placated, entertained and/or pacified. In fact it is

the strength of these films that they are without a sense of overt didacticism, or subliminally improving moral insights so often associated with educational and anthropological documentaries. If there is a transcendent quality it emerges through a sense of gradual inflection and un-concealment, a sort of Leibnizian monadology or associative parallelism, as distinct from an intended use of narrative revelation.⁵ An aspect heightened by the fact that there are no vocally directed textual voiceovers, and where the accompanying street life sounds further magnify the mimetic use of variable sound repetitions through either music or mantra-like recitation.⁶ This said, in terms of spiritual engagement — while the filmmaker eschews any personal religious belief — Chowdhury argues that certain of his methodological approaches

reflect Zen philosophy and the structures of meditation, and that these have to a greater or lesser degree shaped his attitude to filmmaking.

The two-part film *Torsion I, II* deal respectively with the Hindu Festival of Ratha Yatra (The Chariot Festival), a celebration associated with Jagganath (Vishnu ‘Lord of the Universe’, or sometimes represented through his popular avatar Krishna), and is commonly celebrated in Eastern and North Eastern India, and by Hindus in Bangladesh.⁷ While the second part *Torsion II* focuses on the Shia Muslim Festival of Ashura, a grieving commemoration of the Umayyad assassination in Karbala (Iraq) of the Imam Hussain and 72 of his followers on the 10th October in the year 680 — year 61 in the Islamic Calendar — and

Video Still, *Torsions I, II*, 2014, 1 channel, HD ProRes, 1.78:1, Colour, Stereo



who was the nephew through marriage of the prophet Muhammad.⁸ Both films were shot in the quarter of the city that is called Old Dhaka. The festivals are commensurate to the extent that they embody for lack of a better description expressive religions of the throng. They adhere to the expiatory tradition of procession and large scale religious street manifestations within which moments of personal or inner spiritual introspection are outwardly expressed, much like the former Christian pilgrimage processions of an earlier age and those residual pagan conversions brought about by medieval street theatre, observant self-flagellation, and the transgressive traditions of the carnivalesque. In both cases the festivals are examples of the exclamatory aspects of religious faith, that is to say they are shaped by outwardly expressed gestures intended to manifest (symbolically at least) an inferred sense of a greater inward spiritual reality. And in both instances the focus is placed on the gesture and a sense of the kinetic rhythms expressed as repetition and processional movement. In *Torsion I* an emphasis is put upon restless celebration, physical agitation that leads to heightened religious fervour. Conversely, in *Torsion II* the focus shifts towards penance, abrupt gesticulatory recitations, trance like states, and simulated spiritual grieving through actions of expiatory self-punishment. Both of the celebrations aspire through individual and collective expressions aimed at physical immanence to achieve a sense of greater transcendence, the traditionally claimed approach of those religions attesting that the outward

manifestation of God, can only be revealed by the inwardness of immanent engagement and self-presence. A hint of this perhaps may be the occasional silent and luminous irradiated or sun-bleached washout of the images, light perhaps standing in as the contemplative metaphor of allusive spiritual insight. These moments of luminous rupture, however, need to be considered against those that dwell at length on certain other images of flow, and mark the contrasts in the two films that are subtly sound syncopated and image paced through the editing processes. At the same time the fixed camera viewpoint has had the effect of embedding the images in the moments of their capture, and furthermore stresses the objective spatial viewpoints favoured by Chowdhury, “There’s a unique kind of truth that can be found in the construction of spaces and objects, a different kind of intellection and emotion...”⁹ For this reason the films are largely un-cinematic with spatial flattening that objectively intensifies the subject (as object) that is being filmed, and this differs greatly from the commercial cinema that generally favours manipulated pan shots and close-ups to further the narrative storyline. Rather there is a sense of multiplicity in the flow of images, where on the one hand they suggest personal contemplation and self-edification, and on the other hand open up to the viewers of the film a possibility of creating their own mental or sensory frames of pictorial excision from the great welter of sensations presented. The pictorial and emotional sense of changing tone presented in the films

Locus I and *Locus II* is somewhat different by intention. The capture of a visual tonality as to the general attitude and character of a place or situation, as well as the pictured interactive effects of localised colour (metaphorical or otherwise), shade or hue, and light — as is the case in a photograph or painting — is always something that is hard to pin down since it is imbued with the flux of a given consciousness and set of attitudes at the time the events were filmed. The chosen subject matter in these two films is calmer, more focused and introspective, less celebratory and

expiatory, and yet capturing the simplicity of life through daily actions and the common repetition of tasks. In *Locus I*, there are daily routines of the temple, worship, food preparation for offerings and consumption, and actions of personal hygiene. The interactivity between monks and secular worshippers are also recorded, and unexpected interventions where a group of young men burst into the temple and begin drumming and chanting. If the two-part *Torsions* stressed the frenetic and somewhat competitive immediacy of collective communal religious celebration, *Locus I* often evokes

Video Still, *Locus I*, 2014, 1 channel, HD ProRes, 1.33:1, Colour, Stereo



states of reflection, singular inwardness or quietude through meditation. The effect is intentionally inferred in certain instances by the use of camera time as an extension to temporality, lingering or passing onto shots that evoke the two internalised durations of human existence, the terrestrial and the cosmological, the iteration of our material presence, and the transcendent inference of our non-existence — a time beyond imagining — both aspects of which are bound to and exist within the time period of all human lives.¹⁰ In the case of *Locus II*, the emphasis moves

to the call to prayer and the mosque, where it necessarily reflects Islamic concerns with the word, with spoken and recited language, with the Koran as a book of law and a moral code. Though much of what is said by the purported preacher or spiritual practitioner would be nonsensical to our Western minds, the effect on the surrounding audience listening is hypnotic and we stand witness to an engrossed sense of attentive involvement and commitment. This of itself brings a certain unique insight to a Western viewer of the film, particularly enhanced by the film elements reflecting

Video Still, *Locus I*, 2014, 1 channel, HD ProRes, 1.33:1, Colour, Stereo



the house-to-house proselytization of certain devotees. A shortcoming may well be that given the contrast between the temple and the mosque, we are bound to make comparisons between these two viably different religious traditions, and a shortcoming sometimes of Chowdhury's films is that a sense of Western binarism sometimes becomes pronounced and overtly foregrounded. As a result a sort of either/or effect takes place. However, in fairness and nonetheless at the same time, this is perhaps shaped as much by the anthropological or exotic implications of the chosen subject matter when first

experienced by an unfamiliar Western consciousness.

It is self-evident that a personal ethnological component is implied by Chowdhury's filmmaking in Bangladesh, the son of Bengali parents he grew up in Australia. The result is that as a filmmaker he brings to his creative practices a personal and uniquely hybrid sense of modern identity, a particular self-reflexive eye that has been trained in an education system informed and shaped by epistemological dualism and binary oppositions. The question of

Video Still, *Locus II*, 2014, 1 channel, HD ProRes, 1.33:1, Colour, Stereo



conventional subject-object dichotomies implicit to the Western mind, however, is something Chowdhury is well aware of in his approach to filmmaking. His planning and the obvious difficulties of filming in Bangladesh, as well as his daily living within its chaotic flux of momentary order and disorder, supposed spiritual certainties and assured material uncertainties, is visually embedded within the affective aspects of his films. It is something that could be extended to his other recent films such as *Vastness* (2013), a film that concentrates on a quiet timelessness and abrasive mortality of rural existence, or as another example the anthropomorphic interactivity of man and machine in his hypnotic black and white film *Stonework* (2012). The practical and technical aspects of Chowdhury's filmmaking have been discussed elsewhere and expressed in interviews by the filmmaker himself.¹¹ My focus in this short essay has been to reveal the primary motives and philosophical intentions behind Chowdhury's filmmaking. The dominant idea is that film has the possibility of being self-revelatory, that an ontological sense of being or 'self' as presence is manifested in his films. His work clearly focuses on the phenomenology of space and temporality, on proximity and distance, on self and otherness, on finding and establishing a homogenous and potentially self-fulfilling way of life within the materialist consumption and dissonant heterogeneity of the contemporary world. His films are therefore as much a potential or imagined paradigm rather than just images of

anthropological record, and through the unique commitment to the 'ethnography of place' he claims to establish far wider possibilities in terms of an unfolding consciousness. If to possess a secure sense of 'self' is the first premise, that same 'self' can only be understood through difference and otherness, and this seems to be the filmmaker Omar Chowdhury's highly personal mediative viewpoint...

It is as though subjective life in the form of consciousness consisted in being itself losing itself and finding itself again so as to possess itself by showing itself, proposing itself as a theme, exposing itself in truth.

Emmanuel Levinas (1968)¹²

Mark Gisbourne
September 29, 2014

Endnotes

1. The idea of 'being as form' is principally a theologically grounded concept in origin, i.e., being in the form of God, or in other words an incarnation. Something that goes paradoxically against Chowdhury's avowed rejection of religion and claimed embrace of atheism. See Lawrence Dewan, *Form and Being: Studies in Thomistic Metaphysics*, Washington, Catholic University of America Press, 2006.

2. For a concept of 'ontology' meaning quite literally the philosophical study of being, becoming, existence and reality: see Martin Heidegger, *On the Way of Language*, New York and London, 1971 (Ger. *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (1959), Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart, 2007)

3. The word 'aesthetic' derives from *aisthetikos* (Gk.) meaning sensitive and perceptive, or the use of sensory and emotional values for the purposes of forming judgments of value. As defined in modern philosophical usage by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) 'the science that treats of the conditions of sensuous perception'.

4. The concept of the 'undecidability' or aporia and the aporetic (common to the outcome of Platonic Dialogues) has been made relevant again through the post-structuralist writings of Jacques Derrida, see among others *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, Chicago and London, Chicago University Press (1994) 1994, and *The Gift of Death*, Chicago and

London, Chicago University press, (1991) 1995.

5. This is simply to say that they deal with issues of 'inflection', see Dionysios A. Anapolitanus, *Leibniz: Representation, Continuity and the Spatiotemporal*, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishing, 1999 (reprinted under same title in Science and Philosophy, Volume 7, Springer, 2010). For Leinitzian 'inflection' as applied today to visual representation, see Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, Eng. trans., Tom Conley, The Athlone Press, London, 1993. (Fr. *Le pli: Leibniz et le baroque*, 1988).

6. This use of mimesis refers to the use of the deliberate imitation of the behaviour of one group of people by another as a factor in social change, since it is often argued that culture is organized in terms of mimesis and desire. This is a central argument of philosophical anthropology (the metaphysics and interpersonal phenomenological relations), see the writings of René Girard, *Quand ces choses commenceront ... Entretiens avec Michel Treguer*, Paris, Arléa. 1994,; also James G. Williams (ed.) *The Girard Reader*, New York, Crossroad Publishing, 1996

7. The main centre for this God-journeying 'Ratha Yatra — Feast of Three Chariots' (Jagganatha, Balarama, and Subhadra) is the city of Puri (Orissa) where many millions of devotees and pilgrim congregate at the mid-year (date variable) for the celebration filmed live on Indian and foreign television stations. The ISKCON Hare Krishna Movement, since

1968 have carried this festival around the world.

8. The commemoration or Month of Remembrance takes place on the tenth day (Ashura) of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic New Year (lunar calendar-date variable).

9. Online interview between Kate Vinen and Omar Chowdhury *Torsions I, II* at www.omarchowdhury.com Intellectually and in certain other respects there is something of the Heidegger-like Dasein (a 'being there' or 'presence') approach to Chowdhury's chosen practices as a filmmaker. This point of view contends as traditionally defined that there is a way of being involved with and caring for the immediate world in which one lives, while always remaining aware of the contingent element of that objective involvement, see *Being and Time* (Ger. *Sein und Zeit*, 1926), Eng. trans., John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (1962 and all subsequent editions) Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

10. The philosopher Henri Bergson (1869-1941) called these two embedded human feelings or sensing temporalities the 'little duration' and the 'great duration', see *Duration and Simultaneity: Bergson and the Einsteinian Universe* (*Durée et Simultanéité*, 1922), Eng. trans., Leon Jacobson, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1965. For the increasing influence of Bergson on contemporary thought, see Gilles Deleuze 'Duration as Immediate Datum' and 'One of Many Durations?' in *Bergsonism* (Fr. *Le Bergsonisme*, Paris,

1966), Cambridge, Mass., and London, MIT Press, 1988, pp. 37-50, 73-91.

11. *op cit.* Online interview between Kate Vinen and Omar Chowdhury www.omarchowdhury.com

12. For a contemporary discussion of 'self and other' see, Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Eng. trans., Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh and London, Duquesne University Press, 1999.

Works

Torsions I, II, 2014,
1 channel, 103m23s, HD ProRes,
1.78:1, Colour, Stereo
Stills and trailer: <http://omarchowdhury.com/index.php/recent/torsions-i/>; <http://omarchowdhury.com/index.php/recent/torsions-ii/>

Locus I, 2014,
1 channel, 149m25s, HD ProRes,
1.33:1, Colour, Stereo*
<http://omarchowdhury.com/index.php/recent/locus-i/>

Locus II, 2014,
1 channel, 70m30s, HD ProRes,
1.33:1, Colour, Stereo*
<http://omarchowdhury.com/index.php/recent/locus-ii/>

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Shows

WAYS
29th May - 2 August 2014
4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art,
Sydney, Australia
<http://omarchowdhury.com/index.php/presentations/2014-4a-centre-for-contemporary-asian-art/>

Torsions
7 February 2014 - 9 February 2014
National Gallery of Art,
Dhaka, Bangladesh
<http://omarchowdhury.com/index.php/presentations/2014-dhaka-art-summit/>

This show will travel to a Australian regional art museum in 2015.

Omar Chowdhury

Omar Chowdhury produces detailed installations created in extended spiritual and empirical immersions into sites that are conceptually and experientially demanding.

His formalist yet deeply felt works hold in generative tension various polarities: narratives and the surreal, materiality and the immaterial, rhythm and chaos, humour and melancholia, power and weakness, and memory and forgetting. Out of these frictions and cohesions he creates a densely woven and deeply metaphoric language of moral inquiry.

Often working with small crews and cinematic infrastructure, he spends years in both isolated and crowded ecologies to detail epistemological and ontologic questions that are centred on the ambiguities of our consciousness, of time and materiality, and their representations in thought and history.

In 2014 he has current and upcoming solo exhibitions at Shepparton Art Museum and Galleries UNSW. He is the recent recipient of a Bengal Foundation Commission (2014), a finalist for the John Fries Award (2014), received an Australia Council Skills and Development Grant (2014), an Edward M. Kennedy Grant for the Arts (2013), and an Australian Cinematographer's Society Gold Award. He has shown works in galleries, institutions, and festivals in Australia, Asia, and Europe. He was born in 1983 and studied at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. He currently lives and works both in Sydney, Australia and Dhaka, Bangladesh.

<http://omarchowdhury.com>

Mark Gisbourne

Mark Gisbourne was born in Stratford-on-Avon, in England (1948). Educated in Rome, and Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, where he was a tutor. Lecturer Master's Programme, Slade School of Art, University College, University of London, and Senior Lecturer Sotheby's Institute, Masters Programme(s) (accreditation University of Manchester), where he supervised numerous contemporary art dissertations, many of his students have become directors and curators of museums and galleries across the world. He is a former Treasurer and twice President of the British Art Critics Association (AICA), an International Vice-President AICA, and he co-organised the World Congress of Art Critics, Tate Modern following the museum's opening in 2000. Recent Visiting Professorships include the University of Sassari, and the Alvar Aalto University, Helsinki.

His concentration today is an international curator of exhibitions across Europe, and as a writer of more than a dozen books and nearly three hundred catalogue publications, these having been published variously in over twenty languages. For the last ten years he has curated the international exhibition Rohkunstbau in Brandenburg (the last being Rohkunstbau XX 'Revolution', July-September, 2014) that included many international artists and produced extensive catalogues. He is currently

involved in a series of exhibition projects with German artists in both Zagreb and Berlin. As a contemporary critic he has written numerous articles and reviews over the last thirty years. His latest book publications in English, English/German, English/Spanish, English/Russian published in 2013-14, include among others a Collector's book *ERZGEBURTSTAG "ERZKUNST"* (Kerber Verlag, Berlin, 2013), a new three hundred page publication *Berlin Art Scene* (Becker Joest Volk Verlag, February, 2014), and several monographic publications on Titus Schade (Distanz Verlag, 2013) Paule Hammer (Kerber Verlag, Berlin, 2013), Markus Keibel (Berlin, Distanz Verlag, 2013), Adrian Ghenie (Berlin, London and New York, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2014), Bosco Sodi (2014, Mexico City and New York), Anne Wolff 'Persona' Glass Sculpture (Arnoldsche Art Publishers, Stuttgart, October, 2014) and Philipp Fürhofer 'Diaspheres' (Hatje Cantz, May, 2014), and most recently monographic essays in *Via Lewandowsky*, Christoph Steinmeyer, Rayk Goetz (Kerber Verlag, October 2014) and Kames Lee Byars (curator and catalogue, Nicolai Verlag, Berlin). His recent international touring exhibition with an extensive catalogue was *I Am A Berliner: Eighteen Positions in Berlin Painting* (Zagreb, Kunsthalle of the Artist Association, 2012; Helena Rubenstein Pavilion, Tel Aviv Museum; Sassari Modern and Contemporary Museum, Sardinia, 2013). He currently lives and works in Berlin.

MOMENTUM

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Opening

Wed 10 Sep 19.00

11 Sep — 05 Oct 2014

MOMENTUM Berlin

Dialogue

With Mark Gisbourne

Sat 04 Oct 18.30

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