

GREY ZONES
In conversation with Kaushal Sapre



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Sven Christian [SC]: You're currently working on an audio work, sampling a voice. Let's start there?

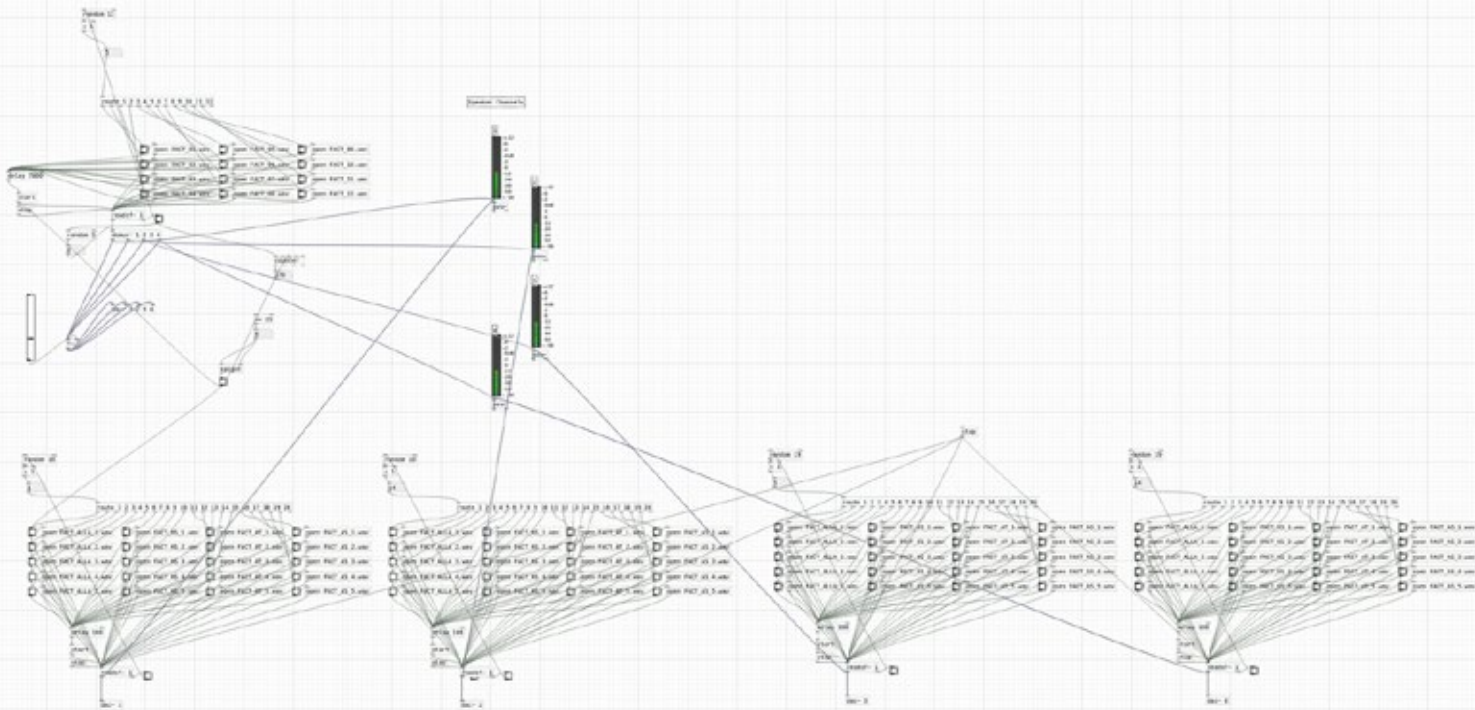
Kaushal Sapre [KS]: It's the voice of Zul Vellani, who narrates a film called *Man in Search of Man*. It was made in 1974 and was commissioned by the Films Division in India — a film production company owned by the government, and it was broadcast on the state-run TV channel, which monopolised the airwaves at the time. In that sense it was a part of an apparatus that played an important role in the production of an optical regime in the post-independence, post-colonial 'nation-building' phase of India. This particular film is about a crew that goes on an anthropological research expedition to this archipelago — the Andaman & Nicobar Islands — which extends from the Bay of Bengal towards South East Asia. The islands themselves have historically been treated as a geopolitical grey zone within the larger power dynamics in the region. Then the freshly independent Indian state comes along and gains control over the territory.

The expedition documented in the film was to look for and establish contact with humans that reside on these islands, but had supposedly never crossed paths with 'modern civilisation'. In one incident, the crew tried to land their ship on a 'previously uncontacted' island, only to be shot at and driven away by the natives. India sent many such unsuccessful 'friendly contact' missions in the next few years. Finally in 1991 an official moment of contact was established. It's funny how this moment was widely celebrated in the media, and there were claims and counterclaims within academic and bureaucratic circles over who

was the first to 'touch the natives'. Who touches and who gets touched is a contentious subject in India, especially in the context of the caste system and untouchability, and it is interesting to observe the fetishism involved in all this.

For me, the voice in the film was interesting because it was articulating some kind of civilizational stake. There is something interesting about these words and gestures of innocent curiosity, discovery, and friendly contact. For example, the voice elaborates a list of all the gifts that the crew carries with them to offer to the natives — coconuts, plastic buckets, bolts of cloth, aluminum cookware, a doll, a live pig and so on. It is interesting to imagine a society based on the gifts it would give to others. There's a nice story about Vasco da Gama in this context — when he first reached the shores of India in 1498, he gathered together gifts for the Zamorin of Calicut. He managed to collect twelve pieces of cloth, four scarlet hoods, six hats, four strings of coral, a case containing six washbasins, a case of sugar, and two casks each of oil and honey. Before presenting them, he consulted with one of the local officials, who informed him that even the poorest of merchants from Mecca, or for that matter anywhere else, gave more. So Da Gama decided to meet the Zamorin empty handed. When asked by the King why a traveller from a reportedly wealthy land came empty handed, he replied that his voyage was simply one of discovery. 'What are you here to discover then,' asked the Zamorin to Vasco da Gama, 'Stones or men?'

SC: The list of gifts you initially mentioned is quite patronising. It seems like smoke and daggers. But I want to ask about your treatment of this godly narrator's voice, your sampling of it, to create a cut-up or collage that you reconfigure and play back on a keyboard?



KS: Yes, on a keyboard or an algorithmic instrument that generates midi notes. But when I perform with it, I also include stories, notes, and other ideas that I wrote. I play the voice of the narrator as an instrument, then speak on top of it or underneath it – some kind of harmonizing or disharmonizing. Chopping samples was one part, but I felt like my voice and what I was reading could ground what was being done with the samples.

SC: I think about others who've done similar things in literature, like Kathy Acker, where the cut-up becomes a way of releasing something from its conditioning, or from what we take for granted. In some sense, the abstraction seems to create a space through which one can maneuver. It's similar to what you've

been doing with the prints: there's the grand narrative, but then you find your way into it through a distortion of the digital image. Could you talk a bit about that juxtaposition — what it's like to work with digital images versus sound, in the way that you do?

KS: I can think of slight technical differences between working with digital images and sounds in the sense of the actual logic of discretization that operates between the two, which then structures possibilities of manipulating either. But apart from that, I find it more interesting to think about how visibility and aurality operate in the digital, or how images and sounds can occupy or direct sensory fields. I am reminded of the text you shared with me, *Dr. Satan's Echo Chamber* (2012).¹ What I really found interesting about it was the way it reads the sound effects rendered by dub music producers using the mixerboard — like delay, reverb and echo — as more than just instrumental technical manipulations. Instead a link is established between what a producer does with sound in their studio on a technical level, and a whole history of migration of black bodies — of evoking sounds coming from vast distances and temporal dimensions. I am really trying to get into this way of thinking through technology. I recently started using a pair of bluetooth earphones, and the capacity of these machines to innocuously replace an aural environment around oneself is fascinating. I don't think you can do the same thing with visual environments yet. But yes, right now I do seem to have an obsession with grand narratives, creation myths, and things like that.

SC: How did that come about?

1. Louis Chude-Sokei. 2012. "Dr. Satan's Echo Chamber." Cape Town: Chimurenga.

KS: It started with myths about the creation of fire, specifically. The idea comes from Bernard Stiegler's reading of such myths as metaphors that produce a

relation between the moral order and the technical order of a society. His own work around the myth of Prometheus, his theft of fire and gifting it to humankind. The idea that to be human is to have an essential lack that is compensated by technical prosthesis is very interesting. In the Vedic version of this myth, the gift of fire is not given to all humans, but only to the Brahmins. Just before starting the residency I was reading this book by Amita Kanekar called *A Spoke in the Wheel* (2014). The novel is set in the Ashokan Empire, around 300 years after the death of the Buddha. One of the interesting things that she does is that she renders a picture of fire as the cutting-edge technology of the time and a milieu that gets associated around it. Another example I've been thinking about is when the new telecom bill introduced by the ruling party in 2022 actually compared the 5G spectrum with the Hindu idea of Aatma or the soul, as an analogy for something that is immortal and inexhaustible. So some relation between technology and cosmology is already in the air, and it's important to interrogate it critically.

SC: Contextual specificity seems to appear less and less these days, at least beneath these homogenizing blueprints: a McDonalds is a McDonalds is a McDonalds. Of course, they're not all the same — there's always a fine difference — but the drive seems to be toward making the world look and feel the same everywhere. The internet feels a bit like that too.

KS: The more I travel, the more I realise that the internet in India is very different to that of South Africa. That the internet's not one thing.

SC: True. I tend to think of it as a single structure.

KS: One way to think about the internet is like any other pipeline: like water, gas, or electricity. And just like any other resource, it is shaped by various entities on a protological level. China is a good example because of how their internet is shaped — the state-controlled firewall makes it very difficult to access anything within the Chinese internet and vice versa. Another example is *TikTok*, which I see a lot here in South Africa, but it's banned in India. Or simply the fact that my *Netflix* feed in South Africa looks very different than the one in India. I'm interested in this dissonance between the physical infrastructure of the networks themselves and the totalising mediatic environment called 'The Internet'. Doing a broadcast on *radio_roohafza* while in South Africa meant that data had to be streamed from here to the server in Delhi, passing through undersea cables that are managed by different consortiums of state-owned and private telecom companies. It passes through these pipelines, arrives at the server in Delhi, and then whenever there is a request from anywhere else in the world it sends it back out. Any node along this line can become a leak or a chokepoint. In fact, many do, and then either the protocols kick in and the route corrects itself, or one gets disconnected. And this is true for every data packet that travels through these networks. So there is this interesting relationship between storage and movement on the internet. This makes me think of not one internet for sure; more of a patchwork, perhaps.

SC: I like this material way of thinking about the internet; the idea of a pipeline that runs through the ocean, and how, for example, during the "Mixed Signal Traffic Jam" broadcast from Lang de Moun Mon, sound would travel from someone's microphone along a pipeline to emerge at your server in Delhi, then arrive in my ears almost instantaneously. At the time I was streaming from Inga Somdyala's studio at Reservoir in Cape Town. And that's all happening live! It's mind boggling.



KS: The past few years we've really moved into a streaming economy. Ten or fifteen years ago, watching a movie on the computer meant downloading it. Back then there was a file exchange economy. With the rise of content streaming platforms like *Spotify* or *Netflix*, you don't really hold that digital object. You plug into a stream. When you unplug it's gone. It's a different technology of data transfer, and it affects how we consume media. For me that has repercussions, in terms of how we look at the world or listen to the world. Internet radio is also essentially about streaming. With the *radio_roohafza* servers, what you really get is an old laptop running an assemblage of open source software from an apartment in a Delhi neighborhood. I think the interest is in testing the capacity of this really small scale, precarious DIY system to host the world. The "Mixed Signal Traffic Jam" broadcast was one of the most special things that I did during this residency. There were around twenty artists, poets, and musicians who spent a day together, improvising sounds, noises, and silences. And then a vibe travelling through undersea cables. A big shoutout to Nyamekela "Mzu" Nhlabatsi and Wandile Ndlovu from LDMM for helping pull it off!

SC: There's this broadcast you, Mohit Shelare, and Aasma Tulika made of Ambedkar's speeches, from different historic moments. Can you talk about that intervention: how you found these clips, extracted them...

KS: The recordings come from different moments in Ambedkar's life, but eventually found their way into *YouTube*. At the end of the day, for us, it was Ambedkar Jayanti — the anniversary of his birth. We wanted to do something for that day, so the broadcast happened because of some urge to participate.



It was also about a common interest around the voice. Ambedkar's image is quite iconic, and an important psychogeographic marker in the Indian context. In fact, it was quite something to see Ambedkar's statues here at NIROX! But the voice has a very different capacity for affect, so the curiosity was whether recordings of his voice existed and where we could find them.

SC: In the write up, Mohit mentions how the voice is drawn 'from different times, locations, and situations in Ambedkar's life,' and how 'each time it is

heard, it constructs a new imagination of a listener that exceeds those that came before it.' I'm interested in how you intervene in a space like *YouTube*, where there's a lot of noise from other videos, as well as this selective listening: the choice to isolate, reiterate, and amplify one particular voice on a different platform, where there is less noise. It seems more intentional: as the listener, you can really listen.

KS: Definitely, I think that's true for most archival material. But I do have to say that *YouTube* pages can become really poignant memorial sites. That's the thing about flows on platform economies — they can sometimes produce unintended consequences. Like when the BTS Meal brought down McDonalds' operations in Indonesia due to overdemand during the pandemic. But I agree about the intentionality and the question of really listening, which I think has something to do with attention.

I like to think about this other *radio_roohafza* broadcast called "M for Mimicry"² as an interesting counterpoint to the Ambedkar broadcast. "M for Mimicry" is just a broadcast made up of *YouTube* videos of people — mimicry artists —who teach you how to sound like Narendra Modi. And everyone has these different techniques they teach you to get the voice right: 'Imagine that you're running for a kilometre, and are huffing — that raspy voice.' That kind of stuff.

It's something about how these icons get constructed. Modi's voice is broadcast on the state-owned radio everyday. In fact, the recent propaganda art exhibition that generated controversy in the Indian art scene was produced to celebrate a hundred episodes of the Prime Minister's radio show. So you have this state apparatus meticulously constructing a simulacrum of the leader,

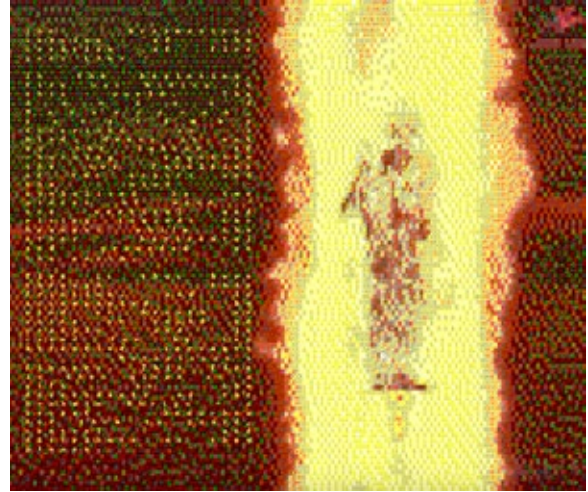
2. See <https://pad.thismightnotbe.online/p/cea1r5s519dudcrd>.



and then you have this other voice that is lost in various archives but embedded in the consciousness of the nation like a spectral presence. So I like the play between those two broadcasts.

SC: Let's talk more about the optical regime you mentioned, that centres on the eye, and bring it back to the prints that you made in residence. Can you provide some context to the source of those images and how they intersect?

KS: So there are four images. Two come from 2023 and two come from the late '90s. All four have been broadcast on national TV. I was born in the '90s, a decade that was quite transformative for India. Liberalisation coincided with the rise of Hindu right-wing outfits, in an overt sense. And the



media had an interesting role in all this. One thing that happened was the telecast of mythological TV shows. Two of the images I worked on come from one such show, called *Om Namah Shivay*, which ran on the state-run channel *Doordarshan* in the late '90s. I remember watching it as a kid, at like 9:30PM, during prime time. So lots of large scale socio-political shifts are at play, and they result in these TV shows. Then there's me as a nine-year-old watching them. It's also one of the first times we saw CGI special effects. There's an interesting link between these mythological shows and computer generated special effects. It's as if that genre demanded technical innovation. As kids, we were captured by all the flying arrows, CGI landscapes, and mythological

weapons of mass destruction rendered in VFX — that kind of stuff. It was quite spectacular.

The other two images are from a couple of months ago, when the new parliament building in Delhi was inaugurated.

SC: Could you talk more about what happened during the inauguration of this new parliament building — the spectacle that surrounded it, the politics of that spectacle, but also your approach or treatment of the footage you were working from?

KS: The new parliament building was inaugurated a couple of months ago in Delhi. It was accompanied by a spectacular ceremony that was replete with various signifiers of autocracy. Videos of the Prime Minister participating in various Hindu rituals, holding a scepter while being surrounded by priests etc. were widely circulated over TV and social media. These are extremely carefully curated media appearances that are meant to hit precise notes on an affective register. A kind of reclaiming of a lost, glorious past. It almost feels like a reality TV version of the mythological TV shows of the '90s!

SC: One of the creation myth images, that of making fire, focuses on this hand gesture. I've seen an interest in such gestures reflected in other works of yours, such as those of Ambedkar's hand pointing at the eye...

KS: Before I came here I was thinking a lot about gestures; this tension between the hand and the eye. I think it began with the work I was



doing with fingerprint sensors. I was particularly drawing these two images — one is the finger pointing towards the horizon and an eye watching it, and the other is where the finger points towards the eye as the self. The latter especially is important for me, as an upper-caste person in India. It's something to do with a critique of the self. But the question really is how to articulate this critique without falling into some kind of a guilt trip where you end up fixating on representational categories.

SC: There are other aspects that come into the picture for me too: the one is the eye, not only as a receptacle for sensory information, but the view of the eye as a window to the soul, and how that connects to the fingerprint works that you made — this systematic mapping of groups through biometrics.

KS: The fingerprints came from a project I worked on with my friend Mohit Shelare. In around 2018, I had been going through this rabbit-hole about how to outsmart fingerprint sensors. These biometric sensors are quite ubiquitous in India, especially after the introduction of Aadhaar — the world’s largest biometric identity system — in 2009. I got a tiny fingerprint sensor module and I would keep trying things with it, using different kinds of adhesive to get a cast of my fingerprint, or trying to reprogramme it by writing code. Mohit was in Pune, teaching in a school, and his job required him to mark attendance on one of these biometric sensors everyday. So every morning he would touch the sensor and then make a quick drawing of it in his sketchbook. He had a lot of these drawings of the fingerprint sensor at his school. Together over a few months we developed gestures, performances, images, workshops, and fictitious biometric identities, among other things. So the sensor takes a picture of your finger when you touch it, and the picture — or the grid of pixels — goes through algorithms that try to identify and store particular patterns and their positions. Most recently I was trying to translate these fingerprint images into a three-dimensional terrain using a computer graphics software.

SC: Like with the prints, the collaging of sound, your treatment of the voice... The fingerprint is an innately abstract thing, right? It reminds me of your research on James Nasmyth, but what I like is that it also exposes the abstract nature of these governing principles. What attracted you to playing that up against Nasmyth’s moon drawings and sculptures?

KS: I encountered Nasmyth's work for the first time while working at Raqs Media Collective studio, who exhibited his moon images in their curation of the Yokohama Triennale 2020. Nasmyth was an engineer and an amateur astronomer from nineteenth-century England. He made detailed observations of the moon with a telescope, which he then converted into these plaster relief models and photographed. He published them in a book called *The Moon: Considered as a Planet, a World, and a Satellite* (1874). This was at a time when photography was not advanced enough to take actual images of the moon in such detail. For me, these images functioned more as references for the kind of vibe I was trying to produce with the 3D models of fingerprints I was working on. Something about a landscape untouched by humanity. Something that is either extremely far away, or extremely far back in time, or in the future... I like the idea of the moon living in James Nasmyth's backyard workshop, or the World-Mountain at the centre of the universe on a fingertip. Perhaps it says something about grand narratives.

SC: And now there's the James Webb telescope, which full circles all the way back, where creation myths meet visuality; being able to see back to the big bang, to see *that thing*...

KS: Do you remember the black hole image thing that was made a few years ago? They got the first direct image of a supermassive black hole in 2019. The actual image is constructed out of data collected from an array of telescopes spread across the earth. The problem was that you couldn't get enough data to produce a complete image, so they tasked three neural networks to reconstruct the black hole images

from the measurements collected by the telescopes. The neural nets were trained on three sets of images — artist simulations of black holes, astronomical images of space, and everyday images of people and things. I'm really flattening the complexity of the process here, but the point is that to visualise something that had never been seen before, something that essentially consumes light, it was necessary to translate unimaginably large databases of images of all the things we can actually identify.

SC: Translation seems quite key to a lot of your work. I don't just mean in the literal sense, in terms of language, but transmission — how one thing shifts into another, becomes something else...

KS: Digitisation itself is an act of translation, and I guess every act of translation comes with loss and reconciliation. For me it's about finding agency in everything that happens around us, or at least some semblance of agency, be it in some material, idea, friend, conversation... Nobody has agency all of the time, but it's something that is worth trying to produce in different situations if you can.

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