

Bearing Witness: Articulating an Archival Practice

ALI AKBAR MEHTA

The number and intensity of conflicts that our age is a witness to are both perplexing and overwhelming. With ongoing instances of wars, conflicts, insurgencies, genocide-level pogroms, riots, bombings, state & extra-state actions and operations, the people of our age have diversified the terminology pertaining to aggressive friction and violence. Furthermore, indirect violence and softer modes of conflicts – whether as forms of patriarchal, ethnic, racialised, colourist, ableist, or gendered enforcement of domination, or the colonial and caste-based extensions of supremacy – continue to alienate us from each other on a daily basis. We live in an age of rising ethnofascism and disintegrating democracies, where conflicts, pandemics, and human crises have become yet another tool for capitalist societies to recycle pain.

Simultaneously, there is increasing information overload: online interfaces for knowledge are steadily becoming opaque, and the data we produce serves the capitalist pursuits of Surveillance Empires, corporations and governments. By declaring ownership of their users' data and engaging in behavioural manipulations for data extractivism, Surveillance Empires and necropolitical governments reshape political world orders, based on techno-legal architectures of control, disenfranchisement, risk management, and legalised policing of violence. We are living in the age of 'Planetary Entanglement' where violence is a fundamental condition at the core of the human experience, in which we are bound to ask, *How to work through the methods and processes of decolonisation, while being assaulted with new forms of colonial, or neo-colonial practices – whether social, political, or economic – on a regular basis? How to learn, to adapt to a historical timeline of struggle against hegemonic power, while unlearning the fundamental biases within the foundations of one's own being?*

It is in this flawed ecology of performative feedback and power relations that I situate my transmedia practice. My work as an artist, curator and researcher over the last two decades maps narratives of histories and identities through a multifocal lens of *violence, conflict, and trauma*. Such archival mappings – as drawings, paintings, new media works, net-based projects, poems, essays, theoretical texts, and performances both of bodies and networks – respond to the past as it inadvertently shapes our future. Keeping with an earlier practice of drawing and painting, I continue to assemble, juxtapose and transform data objects that bear witness to their histories, creating worlds that mirror and shadow our own. Worlds that are at once prophetic of a world hurtling towards a cataclysmic end and yet pregnant with utopian promise; simultaneously transcending borders while witnessing struggles over openness and enclosure, sovereignty and nationalism, citizenship and identity, or for that matter security and freedom.

I'm currently working on *Purgatory EDIT*, a user-generated montage based cinematic experience that examines the power of hegemonic representation within visual and cinematic vocabularies. With this project, I am developing and compiling a unique moving image archive by collecting hundreds of video clips ranging from archival war footage, film clips, documentary footage, advertisements, news clips, landscape panoramas, and home videos. Through this archive, I examine the boundaries between aversion and enforcement, proclivity and phobia. I investigate the worth of worldviews derived from banal dichotomies such as 'Good and Evil' or 'War and Peace', in order to determine whether these meta-concepts make sense in the hyper-nuanced complexities of our world today. As a participatory installation, it foregrounds the use and potential of experimental cutting-edge technologies and investigates how to access cinematic experiences through new and innovative modes of play and care.

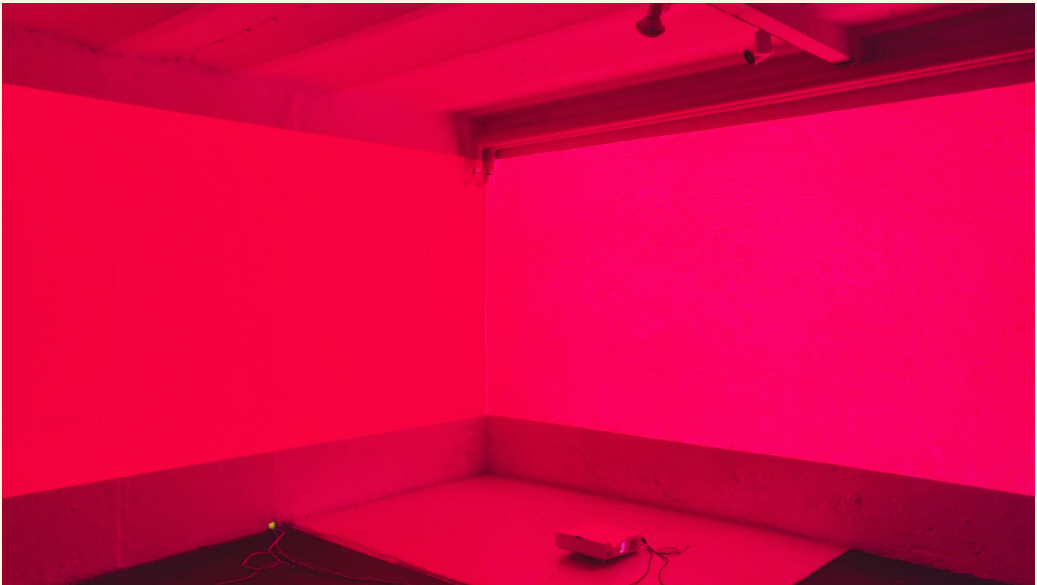
At the centre of my research-led practice is a desire for knowing and for sharing knowledge, to make sense of the world and the construction of meaning, and to create an equal world. By working within the realms of 'System Art', 'Process Art', and 'Generative Art' (all underexposed sub-genres of New Media) as my chosen media, these desires manifest as online and offline archives, as knowledge systems that are often shaped as immersive new media publications and performance installations. My immersive and participatory archival projects are often ongoing, lifelong processes that are complex, and require time to experience and unpack. Through these projects, I invite viewers to experience a focused awareness of how to see the world and navigate their way to more conscious seeing and knowing. I am interested in how art and visual culture can critically engage with other systems and conditions, such as the entanglements of globalisation, transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, and technisation, as well as the desires for secession, separation, localisation, and situatedness.

The emotional register or subject of my practice is to investigate the violence visible in everyday settings and develop knowledge systems that offer countermeasures to forms of violence and conflict generated as everyday collateral, while also presenting methods of healing and dealing with the resulting trauma. I aim to create tangible bodies of work that bear witness to our dichotomous fragmentation. 'Bearing witness' to violence causes the body to transition from the personal act of 'seeing' to adopting a public (ethical and political) collective stance – working through trauma together, to generate and sustain a community. Similarly, to gain the *potentiality of speech* entails taking responsibility – testifying to the truth of what has been witnessed. This transformation of 'witness into testifier' is rooted in fundamental concepts of performativity, particularly for us as online users of digital archives. My practice advocates for archives that serve as witnesses and testifiers to the truths and occurrences of our time, envisioning the creation of a vibrant 'agonistic' public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted. With a core part of our identities formulated as archive users, can we – the users of these archives – still embody the responsibility of giving testimony to histories or truths of occurrences?

The technical and formal register of my practice is to engage with the development of archives as a medium for critical artistic practice, through formal inquiries that investigate and confront online systems, digital extractivism, data infrastructures, and the techno-socio-political architectures of control. I am interested in developing new archival systems, rather than excavating existing archives to re-read them – the widely accepted definition of what 'working with archives' has come to mean, especially within the contexts of artistic practice. By thinking through 'systems' – decoding their use and value in everyday settings, working out new infrastructures and logic of its internal functionality, and developing new rules for archives of the future – I seek to supplant the traditional and institutional (often colonial and/or nation-state oriented) notions of archival structuring. My projects serve as templates of how digital tools and the Internet can be used to envision new free and open-access knowledge platforms. Such templates provide new insights into how archives may be revised, reconfigured, accessed and performed within digital online platforms, to exemplify archiving as a critical resource and point of departure for art-making.

Can our archives provide us with the performative agency to define our commons in our media-saturated, socially omnipresent, politically fractured, economically segregated, xenophobic, disembodied world? My work responds to these questions, to think about archiving as crucial tools that transform and transgress dominant narratives; to develop a framework that is not subsumed by current demands and methods of Post-Internet Art; that creates the conditions of participation, not of spectatorship. ■

ALI AKBAR MEHTA is an artist, curator and researcher. He is currently curating a discursive program with party office for documenta(15). Mehta is a co-founder of the Museum of Impossible Forms and was its Co-Artistic Director (2018–2020). This text is a combination of unpublished excerpts from Mehta's work-in-progress doctoral thesis at the Department of Art, Aalto University.



Installation view, *is there a room with just a colour?*, 2020, Myymälä2, Helsinki

256 Million Colours of Violence is a survey-based interactive archival research project, inviting online and onsite audiences to participate in a survey-based research to actively co-create an archive of colours that represent 'violence'. The survey and colour archive are located on the [project's website](#). Physical exhibitions of this project include:

- 'Data Vitality', 2021, Dipoli Art Gallery, Aalto University, Helsinki
- 'Reboot me softly', 2021, Pikkseel Festival 2021, Bergen, Norway
- 'Is there a room without a colour?', 2020, Myymälä2, Helsinki
- 'Assembly of Access', 2018, TIFA Working Studios, Pune, India
- 'Limitations of Liability', 2017, Exhibited in Mumbai Assembly, Piramal Art Museum, & Harkat Studios, Mumbai, India
- '256 Million Colours of Violence', 2016, Third Space, Helsinki

Website 256millioncoloursofviolence.com



Performance view (Gallen-Kallela Museum), *Ballad of the Lost Utopian Meadow*, 2021, *Aikakoneita Ja Utopioita [Time Machines and Utopia]*, Curated by Hanna Johansson. Performances conducted in Ainola Museum, Visavuori Museum, and Tarvaspää Museum, Finland

Ballad of the Lost Utopian Meadow is an Archive of Finnish food. The project extends the metaphorical implications of what a meadow means to Finland within the contexts of ecological conservation, cultural significance, and as a site of contemporary co-existence. It also exists as an online archive comprising a studio-recorded song and glossary of stories, recipes, as well as excerpts of food and national histories of Finland.

Ballad of the Lost Utopian Meadow was previously exhibited as a sound art piece, at 'Meadow', 2020, ONOMA summer exhibitions 2020, Fiskars, Finland. Curated by Taru Elfving.

Website thelostutopianmeadow.com



Locative map Interface, *Central Park Archive*, 2020, open-source online platform

Central Park Archives is an ongoing archiving project that discusses questions of access, while bridging the gap between public spaces and information commons, and is intended as a long-term framework supported by m-cult. The project seeks to become a contact zone by gathering curated material, archives, and individual/collective praxis on the Keskuspuisto (Central Park, Maunula) and the communities connected to it – as a form of consolidating existing and situated yet fragmented knowledges. Other exhibitions of this project include:

- Central Park Archives, 2021, Maunulatalo, Helsinki
- Central Park Archives sound walk, part of 'Gathering for Rehearsing Hospitalities 2020' program by Frame Contemporary Art Finland, Helsinki
- Artists talk: Rehearsing Hospitalities Companion 2 Readings with Annet Dekker, and Susanna Ânäs and Ali Akbar Mehta, online, part of 'Gathering for Rehearsing Hospitalities 2020' program by Frame Contemporary Art Finland, Helsinki
- Access, commons and networks of care, Gathering for Rehearsing Hospitalities Spring 2021 program, Frame Contemporary Art Finland, Helsinki

Website central-park-archives.github.io/#16/60.227151/24.912975/0/60



Performance view, *Narrating WAR*, 2021, performance installation, Konepaja, Helsinki

WAR ROOM ECHO is a collaborative transmedia performance-installation and research project. It examines the philosophical terrain of war and the seemingly permanent state of conflict across the globe – addressing (present and past) violent incidents in the world not as isolated events but as a new condition of ongoing, unparalleled warfare. This project consists of several ongoing components:

- *Narrating WAR*: Performance reading and typing of the 'War List Codex', an archival publication consisting of a comprehensive yet ongoing list archive of every "War, Battle, Revolt, Revolution, Rebellion, Siege, Sacking, Bombing, and Insurgency" in the world, from 3000 B.C. to the present.
- *The War that is Coming is Not the Last one*: a size variable site-specific charcoal drawing on War performed as an act of mourning, viewed in a dark room with torchlight

Other *Narrating WAR* performances include:

- *Narrating WAR / HABITAT 1*, 2021, 4 performances for RECIPROCITIES, curated by Christine Langenauer, Taidemuseo ARTSI, Vantaa
- *Narrating WAR*, 2020, New Performance Turku, Festival 2020: Mobilities, curated by Leena Kela, Turku,
- *Narrating WAR*, 2019, Performance Reading for 'Relational Figures', Mymmälä2, Helsinki, Finland
- *Narrating WAR*, 2018, 'Experimental Event VI', curated by Anna Jensen and Andrea Coyotzi Borja, Valimo Hall of Palmgren Conservatory, Pori
- *Narrating WAR*, 2018, Carinarnica – exhibition space at the border of Slovenia and Italy, Nova Gorica, Slovenia
- *Narrating WAR*, 2018, 'Performance LAB VII', curated by Vishnu Vardhani, 2018, Museum of Impossible Forms, Helsinki
- *Narrating WAR*, 2018, 'To Participate in the Archive', curated by Vidisha Fadescha, TIFA Working Studios, Pune, India
- *Narrating WAR*, 2016, 'Where Does Poetry Nest?', curated by Giovanna Esposito Youssef, Gallery Emil, Tampere
- *Narrating WAR*, 2016, 'Pan African Space Station', curated by Ahmed Al-Nawas, Kallio Public Library, Helsinki

Website aliakbarmehta.com/content/war-room-echo-regarding-the-pain-of-other-cyborgs#narrating-war-habitat-1



Installation detail, *Narrating WAR (War List Codex)*, 2021, size variable multimedia installation. *RECIPROCITIES*, Vantaa Taidemuseo ARTSI, Vantaa. Curated by Christine Langenauer.



Detail, *The War that is coming is not the last one – part I*, 2021, acrylic on unstretched canvas, 1600 x 290 cm. 'To Err is Human', Mänttä Art Festival 2021. Curated by Anna Ruth.