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Aveek Sen

Sent a Letter

The Eye in Thought: The Very Rich Hours of Dayanita Singh

Aveek Sen

Seven little books in a small white box. Each book is about 9 x 13 cm and has a blank, dust-coloured cover. Six of them bear just the name of a place on their slim spines – *Calcutta*, *Bombay*, *Varanasi*, *Allahabad*, *Devigarh* and *Padmanabhapuram* – with no volume-numbers to indicate any kind of sequence. The remaining volume, its cover a darker shade of dust, bears a name on its spine: *Nony Singh*, who, we learn, is the author's mother. Open one of them, and there is no title-page. Just a 7 x 7 cm black-and-white photograph of exquisite clarity, printed on white paper with no caption. And then what begins to open into one's hands from behind the first image is a trail of images, each like a jewel, printed on accordion-folds that fan out of the book and can be folded back in again. There are more than 140 black-and-white images in the seven volumes, and no information about people or dates, only the barest idea of a place that gathers the photographs in clusters. So each book can be "read" closely and slowly as one reads a volume of short poems, dwelling on each image and then pondering their arrangement in intermittent, intriguing sequences. Or the volumes can be kept open and unfolded like a portable exhibition or "nano-museum" on a bookshelf, table or mantelpiece, making – as, in "The Good Morrow", John Donne believed the wonder of love could make – "one little room an everywhere".

Dayanita Singh's *Sent a Letter* (Steidl, 2007) grew out of what she describes as a "diary-like way" of photographing that she started around the year 2000. She would take photographs while walking around a city or travelling together with, or simply thinking about, a friend. Soon, she began pasting contact sheets of these photographs, cut into squares or made into small prints, on the blank pages of accordion-fold notebooks or Moleskines. For each friend, she would make two notebooks, sending one as a coded letter to its specific addressee, and archiving the other in her own "kitchen museum". By 2007, she had made more than thirty such books. One of them reached her publisher, Gerhard Steidl, for whom photography has always been inseparable from book-making. Steidl persuaded her to select a few of these notebooks and publish them as mass-produced books, but without making any explanatory changes for the general reader.

The *Calcutta* volume thus depicts a day's journey through the city with Steidl, stopping to observe the local makers and binders of books, and other craftsmen who work with paper. This "secret history" of book-making is interlaced with the progress of what looks like a single day from morning to night. Those who recognize Steidl and the locations will get from the sequence a particular set of meanings; for those who cannot, the book could become a different sort of adventure – charting the changing of the light from morning to night, or thinking about the ways in which books and paper are part of our everyday lives. Behind and between these visual "stories", as one's acquaintance with the books deepens, the absent photographer starts becoming an elusive and alluring presence at the heart of the books. Each volume begins to open up, purely through the images (and the relationships among them), into a world of subtly evoked emotions, attachments and associations. It takes the viewer, if he has the time for such a thing, on a journey that leads along the inner life of the artist to an inwardness that becomes the viewer's own, without losing sight of the enigmatic spirit of the place that is the actual setting of each book.

In *Sent a Letter*, this interior world remains reticent and mysterious, but is achieved through technical precision and rigorous thinking, taking photography beyond the urgency of having to capture the "decisive moment", towards documenting an ongoing engagement with reality, time and the photographic medium that is at once intellectually profound, visually novel and imbued with human feeling. This demands from the viewer a sensibility and range of reference that move beyond the optical and mental habits of what still remains, at least in India, a Cartier-Bresson school of photojournalism, restoring this most modern and popular of aesthetic media to its place among the fine arts, literature and music. With their movement from the single photograph to the sequence, the large print to the small image, the gallery to the book, and from expensiveness to affordability, these volumes deliberately play with established modes of making, viewing and owning photographs. Once before, in 2005, Dayanita had designed the catalogue of her *Chairs* exhibition as an accordion-fold notebook with no writing in it. And it was the cherished intimacy of this format that made her think of devising a way of distributing the books without putting a price on them. She drew up a list of friends, each of whom were given ten books, and the decision of whom the books would be passed on to by these people would be entirely theirs, and therefore unknown to the artist. *Sent a Letter* returns to this "private" format, but dispenses with limited editions in being mass-produced and sold for a price. Yet, instead of treating them as collections of "reproductions", it is the published books themselves that are displayed as "original" works of art in the galleries, often accompanying a more conventional exhibition of framed prints, as in Dayanita's *Ladies of Calcutta* show in Calcutta in 2008. To play continually with photography's relationship

with the market and the medium, with printing and pricing, thus becomes part of a constant exercise of thought. This makes the creation of meaning and value inseparable from photography's shifting relations with the private and the public, the original and the reproduced, the exquisite and the ordinary, the acquired and the owned.

Many of the sequences in *Sent a Letter* are about, among other things, this movement of photography withindoors and within, and about a simultaneous reduction of scale. The *Allahabad* volume opens with the photograph of a huge portrait of Nehru hanging in what looks like a public gallery, framed by the backs of two men standing indifferently on either side. We are then taken directly into a bedroom in Anand Bhavan in which a portrait of Kamala Nehru[1] hangs above the bed. This is followed by the image of another portrait of Kamala, hanging above a writing-table with books and stationery on it, among which there are other, much smaller, framed photographs, the subjects of which cannot be identified given their size. A couple of images later, we are taken even closer to the bedside table we had seen in the first bedroom. On this little table, we can see double-framed family photographs of Indira, kept in front of an old Eagle flask and lit by a bedside lamp, with a paperback in the foreground, kept as if to be read in bed. Interlaced with this opening sequence are haunting images of a hanging overcoat, walking sticks and garlands in Nehru's closet, as well as monogrammed crockery, all part of the "interiors" of Anand Bhavan.

This progression from public largeness to private smallness is echoed in the opening sequence of *Bombay*. It opens with a monumental statue flanked by palm trees in a public square, followed by a smaller, more Roman-looking figure. Then busts of Vallabhbhai Patel and Vivekananda, human models in a glass cabinet in a museum, and startlingly, a deformed human head preserved in a jar, and even smaller, a little foetus in a jar surrounded by darkness. This sequence is not only about the shrinking of scale as one moves from city-square through museum-cabinet to specimen-jar, but also about the contraction of life itself into the gem-like photograph of the foetus – life arrested by death, and by photography, into an image of eternally suspended possibility.

Allahabad is a book about history and about family, and about the history of a family, held, looked at and studied within its rooms, furniture, letters, books, clothes, paintings and photographs. These were all once intensely private possessions, but are now open to public view. Here, history and historical research are guilty of what photography is often accused of and is uniquely in a position to document: the experience, as well as the violation, of privacy.

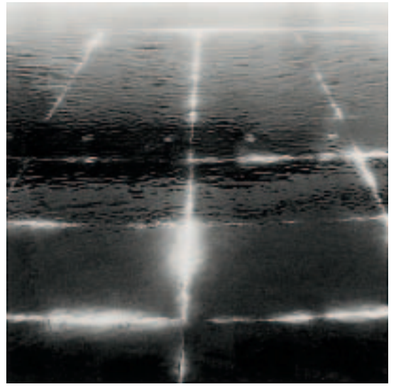
[1] Wife of Jawaharlal Nehru and mother of Indira Gandhi. *Ed.*

Bombay explores the civic and museological counterpart of this historical process, working into it the incursion of time and mortality that reduces the living to the preserved and the memorialized. Photography colludes with this process, but also records its beauty and pathos. Yet something altogether more disconcerting and difficult to put into words begins to happen as one dwells on the *Allahabad* volume. Initially, prepared by some of the unpeopled interiors in Dayanita's *Privacy* (Steidl, 2003), we start by looking at the bedrooms, library and closets in this series for the haunting beauty of ordinariness, of inhabited spaces mysteriously emptied of the people who live in them. Because the title simply mentions *Allahabad*, we may not, at first, think of Anand Bhavan and the Nehrus, and of the peculiar history of these rooms and objects. Then, we begin to notice the catalogue numbers on the books, or come upon the common men and women crowding behind the glass panels and trying to peer into the rooms. Suddenly, the very ordinariness of the rooms becomes sharply strange, almost surreal; their privacy, their capacity to draw us closer to their intimate silences, are wordlessly turned inside out on to the realm of the "public" and the "historic", and the larger meanings of these closed, yet also startlingly open, spaces begin to dawn on us, together with the actual significance of their emptiness. Our initial experience of their spare, somewhat archaic beauty, of the quality of the light in them, of the way in which they make us feel about the absence of people, begins to get complicated by these larger historical realizations and reflections. The spell of ordinariness is broken, and replaced with something that profoundly unsettles the way we are used to accepting the evidence of our senses, what we unthinkingly see, believe and feel.

Moving from *Allahabad* to *Devigarh*, we again see in the opening sequence of nine images the movement from outside to inside. The first image is an enigmatically lit-up room photographed from outside and below, against open skies and a hint of hills. The structure – a house or a wing of a house – also looks, from this angle, like part of a human face, so that the photographer seems to be simultaneously drawn towards, and shut out from, not only a room but also a human presence. If this makes the first image of *Devigarh* a frontal portrait of a room, then the second is a profile: the side that we see has no windows, and the surrounding skies and hills have become vaster. So its central subject is more closed off and distant, in a peculiarly human way, even as the space enlarges from the first photograph to the next. And as we move on to the images that follow, the built structures shrink in size as the photographer seems to move further away from them. At the same time, the skies seem to grow larger and heavier above

them, and there is a movement, too, from single structures to many smaller repeated structures on what could be the ramparts of a fort. With this movement from the one to the many, we also move inside, to a receding vista of small rings hanging from a ceiling, and to the patterns on what looks like bricks but, on a closer look, seem to be rectangular panels of illegibly minute writing (in Urdu?), followed by rows of little discs of cracked, dry earth on which there is an inexplicable dark splash, like a bloodstain. Finally, giving us a quiet shock of privacy, there is the image of a starkly empty and perfectly made double bed with rows of framed pictures above it. From sky, hills and ruins, we have moved withindoors to a bed. The second series of photographs takes up this double-bed and cleaves it apart, placing a window of empty light between its sundered halves, the smaller windows on either side echoing the arrangement of pictures above the bed in the previous image. Then we look far out, from a height, on to fields and mountains. But before the miniaturized vastness of these two landscapes there is an image that shows the photographer herself, somewhere between a shadow and a reflection, standing both inside and outside these spaces in a way that remains difficult to figure out completely. This series is then followed by a pair of twinned images that takes up both the ideas of the cloven bed and the reflected photographer. The divided bed becomes an empty table laid out for two people, who are then seen at the table, reflected in what appears to be a mirror on the ceiling above them (the rings at the four corners of the mirror echo the vista of rings in the opening sequence), and one of the two people is, of course, the photographer taking the photograph.

The final image in *Devigarh* is also the final image of *Go Away Closer* (Steidl, 2007), that earlier, single-volume distillation of *Sent a Letter*, in which a few of the latter's images are placed as part of a different sequence, and which stands in relation to *Sent a Letter* as an overture or opening movement of a symphony would stand in relation to the opera or the following movements, holding within it the narrative and musical seeds that grow into the larger work. This final image of departure in *Devigarh* and *Go Away Closer*, a liquid pathway gridded by light and receding from the viewer, marks the culmination of a visual language to which *Go Away Closer* was a more condensed and elliptical prelude. To describe in words the unfolding of sequences and themes in *Devigarh* is not really to decode them, but to realize how close Dayanita is bringing her photography, in these little books, to the condition of literature and music, and to the peculiar ways in which these other forms of art encode, evoke, elaborate and reflect on human experience. Yet, the more her work aspires to the



condition of writing and of music, the more shorn of words, the more purely visual, it becomes.

In *Devigarh*, the movements from outside to inside, from the distant to the close and to the distant again, from the vastness of land and sky to the intimacy of interiors, from absence to human communion and then to departure and emptiness, from the photographer's elusiveness to her subtle self-inscription as shadow and reflection, remain inextricable from one another, lending to the book the depth and complexity of literary fiction or musical elaboration. Rooms and persons, *Devigarh* seems to suggest, invite and resist, in intriguingly similar ways, the photographer's desire to make them part of her own creation of meaning and value in art. Earth and sky, walls and mirrors, beds and chairs, frames and windows, focal points and vanishing points play with one another a perpetual game of give and take, seduction and resistance, reciprocity and rejection, arrival and departure, presence and absence. And these games become part of the ever-changing "go away closer" of photography, bringing its language close to the language of love and the projections and mirroring of desire: "When we are in love, our love is too vast to be wholly contained within ourselves; it radiates outwards, reaches the resistant surface of the loved one, which reflects it back to its starting-point; and this return of our own tenderness is what we see as the other's feelings, working their new, enhanced charm on us, because we do not recognize them as having originated in ourselves."[2] In *Sent a Letter*, this potentially endless circuit of projection and resistance, the turning and returning of love, is both echoed in, and freed into, the wordless communion between viewer and image, as the eye is made quiet by the power of thought. Such an exchange is perhaps at its most ineffable in the volume entitled *Padmanabhapuram*. The core of this volume takes us through a sequence of darkening seascapes. Between the first two is the image of a floor so highly polished that its solidness seems to be turning into liquid darkness even as we look. The immensity of these seascapes, uniting sea, rocks and sky in a dark and heaving stillness, finally contracts into the image of a single flower. This fragile blossom glimmers in the night, as if holding out the promise of its beauty against the dissolving power of a vast and pervasive sadness.

"A real letter", Nehru had once written, "is a strange and revealing amalgam of the two – the one who writes and the one who receives."[3] Hence, a letter is always poised between being sent and being received, reciprocity and rejection, and what lies between the two poles of this uncertain communion is an equally unpredictable space of accident, of the myriad possibilities of deflection and of loss. The little poem that gives *Sent a Letter* its title, and which is inscribed in black on the white box, draws attention to this in-between world of chance: "Sent a letter / to my friend / on the way he dropped it. / Someone came and / picked it up and / put it in his pocket." This is a song that children sing while skipping or playing an old game of randomly dropped and picked-up objects. In the usual version of the song, the person who drops the letter is the sender ("on the way I dropped it") and not the receiver. Dayanita turns this situation around by making the receiver drop the letter ("on the way he dropped it"), so that the sender's puckish carelessness becomes the receiver's whimsical indifference. For Dayanita, the letter becomes a rejected or neglected gift that is picked up by someone who was not meant to have received it in the first place, and for whom it becomes an altogether different thing – a gift of chance that demands no return. So, it is this failure or accidental deflection of an original circuit of giving and receiving (Nehru's "amalgam") that results in the sender's relationship with the dropped letter's eventual owner, a process over which the sender has as little control as the owner. This small incident – captured with the lightest irony in the poem on the box – becomes an allegory of the relationship between Dayanita's photography, particularly in its most "private" forms, and the larger, more public, world of anonymous and unpredictable viewership: the hazardry of transforming a personal, and personalized, way of making photographs and photographic books into a process that involves publication and commerce. Something uniquely given to a specific person turns into a mass-produced object sold to unknown people. Thus the frame that holds *Sent a Letter* together is a rueful fiction of the waylaid gift, dropped to be picked up again; valued, unvalued and revalued; turning into something other than what it was meant to be, and waiting to be found, as Helena finds her moon-changed lover at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, "like a jewel, / Mine own and not mine own".

[2] Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, Vol. 2: *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, London, Penguin, 2002, p. 185.
[3] Quoted by Sunil Khilnani in his introduction to *A Bunch of Old Letters*, selected and edited by Jawaharlal Nehru, New Delli, Penguin, p. xxvi.