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SHUBIGI RAO

Stories of Creation and Destruction

BY CHLOE CHU



Portrait of SHUBIGI RAO. Courtesy Kathrin Leisch.

Why do some people abet authoritarianism? What ideas might be repressed in democracies? How much of ourselves do we really know? These questions don't have singular resolutions, but for Shubigi Rao, hints can be found in the voices that books contain and in the perspectives we censor. "I don't valorize books," Rao emphasizes, for they can hold dangerous, destructive ideas as much as beautiful ones. Rather, in her ten-year series *Pulp: A Short Biography of the Banished Book* (2014–), a portion of which is displayed in the Singapore Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale, she understands books as distillations of human ideas, and by resurfacing stories of individual volumes and whole libraries that have been destroyed, she seeks to resist the domination of any one strain of thought.

Armed with empathy and wit, Rao has been infiltrating what she calls "monoliths of power" since her first ten-year project—a biography of a different, parafictional sort, which she began in 2003, shortly after moving from India to Singapore. Her output from this period—from pseudo-archaeological digs sited in Singapore to neuroscientific studies evidencing that contemporary art deranges the brain—is credited to a S. Raoul, a paper-mustached, male alter-ego whom she has cheekily called a "scapegoat" and "paper tiger" in various interviews. S. Raoul was a survival

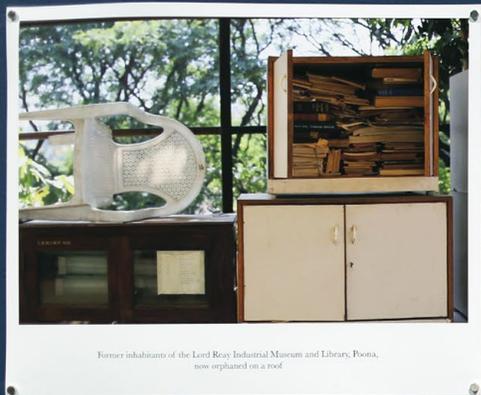
mechanism that mediated Rao's existence in the art world, which she had hesitated entering—despite enjoying making art, she earned her first degree in English literature from Delhi University—due to the industry's rampant nepotism and male domination. This mysterious fictional character allowed Rao to deflect attention away from who she is and toward her work, and won her recognition as a polymath, a descriptor that would put Rao, as a woman, in lonely ranks.

Nominally, in this first phase of her career, Rao was S. Raoul's humble assistant and collaborator. But then S. Raoul tripped over a stack of ink-soaked books that his obituary describes as "survivors of violent acts of cultural genocide"—the conceptual roots of Rao's next project—and broke his neck. Upon his death, Rao became his biographer, penning with both regret and relish the hefty tome *History's Malcontents: The Life and Times of S. Raoul* (2013), which accompanied his posthumous exhibition "The Retrospectacle of S. Raoul" in 2013 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore. In the publication's introduction, Rao writes of S. Raoul as possessing "a mind that was unable to disguise its contempt

for those . . . bent on what he believed to be inferior pursuits, and he regarded biography as one." Elaborating on his view of the genre as "literary gossip," the chapter "Bastardising Biography: An Extraordinary Initiative" reproduces a manuscript by S. Raoul that was displayed in its original porcelain-covered, hand-bound form at the show. "We will turn your life upside down/ We will turn you inside out/ We will Unearth the Earth that covers you/ We will turn like worms in your apple/ We will turn you into a book," it partially reads, musing on the violence that accompanies written accounts of others' lives, where one's control over one's own story is wrangled away. Ironically, of course, Rao herself accomplishes this extraordinary initiative of bastardizing biography. Both a perpetrator and a victim of claims to authoritative accounts and the entanglements of art-making, writing, and lying, she became invested in the forces that shape or obfuscate subjectivities and their traces in books.

There were more tragic reasons for *Pulp's* genesis too. Rao recounts growing up with a repository of rare and rescued titles, including natural and political histories, that her parents cherished.

Partial installation view of SHUBIGI RAO's "Written in the Margins" at Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, 2017. Courtesy the artist.



Former inhabitants of the Lord Ray Industrial Museum and Library, Poona, now orphaned on a roof



My sister and brother-in-law's bed, helpfully supported by the latter's favourite books



The Picture (private library of the Paterson family, Fiesca, Sussex)



Abandoned book, Marbachhof, Berlin



Obsolete catalogue cards, British Library, London



Bootleg German copy of *The Satanic Verses*, made under a false imprint, with almost 200 writers, artists, politicians, and organisations listed as the publishers



SHUBIGI RAO, *A Small Study of Silence*, 2021, still from single-channel video with four-channel sound: 29 min 36 sec. Courtesy the artist.

to understand things for what they actually are, and a breakdown of communication results.

Commissioned for the Asia Pacific Triennial 10 and a brief break from the *Pulp* project, the video *A Small Study of Silence* (2021) likewise took communication as its focus. Footage of treetops and other bucolic scenes are backed by bird calls recorded by the artist's mother and siblings. Rao shared that, dispersed over multiple continents and unable to travel during the pandemic, her family began sending each other audio messages with these avian trills—just one of the types of animal sounds they learned to decipher after moving to northern India in the 1980s, when her parents renounced the city. Living in a mud hut among predators such as tigers, the artist heeded the warnings that animals audibly exchanged. However, due to anthropogenic noise pollution, these interspecies signals are breaking down. Through a reflection on one family's attempts to reach through silence, the video also hints at a greater crisis threatening Earth's ecologies.

At the Venice Biennale, Rao's newly completed video and book explore other endangered languages as part of *Pulp*, including Kristang, from Malacca, and Cimbrian, from the Veneto region. Layered into the video *Talking Leaves* (2022) are ruminations on Venice as the birthplace of the paperback, which democratized print as a medium and advanced literacy, in turn contributing to the downfall of feudalism. Additionally, the video examines how print circulation in the 19th-century Malay world reflected early globalization, and the current threats to print and press freedom. Rao thus underscores the connections that language engenders. "I examine our species through our traumas but also our redemptive acts of writing, speaking, storytelling, listening, and that community that we create when we work with language and with text," she said. Ever hopeful and incisive, she brings us face to face with the best and worst of ourselves.

When she was still a child, robbers broke into the family's house, and, upon finding nothing of monetary value, destroyed their prized library in a fit of anger. Rao, then, relates directly to the people she has been interviewing as part of *Pulp* who have suffered similar violent acts.

Telling me more about the motivations for the multimedia project, she said: "I wanted to make work that has more than hope in it—proof that as human beings we have more in common than we remember. And that we care for other cultures, not just our own. When the Taliban destroyed the Bamiyan Buddhas, you didn't have to be Buddhist to feel that pain. I felt that pain as a teenager too when I saw the library of Sarajevo burning in the 1990s. That was also one of the few times I saw my mother crying . . . I know that your pain is a shared pain, and you don't need to feel that pain alone."

The ten-year time frame of *Pulp* is key to this hope and sensitivity. "When one cares deeply about things, it is easy to feel despair," Rao has said, explaining her motto for how to deal with this despair: "It is not necessary to be effective in one's time." While one might not see a reversal to the rise of demagogues and dictators within the decade, the long duration of her project at least removes the urgencies of the art market and industry, and affords the artist the space to carefully contemplate her research, fulfilling an ethical responsibility to those who share their stories with her.

Three years after the project's initiation, Rao debuted works from *Pulp* at Berlin's Künstlerhaus Bethanien in "Written in the Margins," displaying a series of video interviews with writers and bookkeepers whose lives are entangled with collections such as Sarajevo's Vijećnica library and London's Wildgoose Memorial Library.

Captioned photographs detail the favorite books of Rao's brother-in-law, who used them to prop up a lopsided bed; author Ray Bradbury's hopeful letter to Sarajevo on the reconstruction of its library; and a German copy of the controversial novel by Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), published by an unnamed collective of over 200 people under a false impressum; as well as other book-centric scenes simultaneously alluding to re-creation and effacement.

Notably, "Written in the Margins" included a drawing of a phylogenetic tree that relates poetic phrases like "the epiphanic vision" and "the wishful thinking" as annotations on two proximate branches from the same trunk, harking back to Rao's ink-on-paper chart *Tree of Lies: A Conversion Table* (2013), which places questionable societal values, such as "bottomline as top," "business as usual," and "work as obligatory," in hierarchical relationships. In appropriating the diagrammatic form that 19th-century European biologists used to sort organisms in order of proximity to god, these drawings reveal the decolonial thrust in the artist's work, which ironically critiques the notion that some ideas are more important than others. For Rao, when the "order" of the Western mind ignores context, subjectivity, and forms of knowledge that are messy, multivalent, or inconvenient, it fails



SHUBIGI RAO, *Talking Leaves*, 2022, still from video: 90 mins. Courtesy the artist.