



Documenting the History of the Banished Book

Bharti Lalwani in conversation with Shubigi Rao

Pulp: A Short Biography of the Banished Book: Vol. I, published 2016, RockPaperFire Singapore. Photo credit: Studio Swell, Singapore.

Critic Bharti Lalwani speaks to artist Shubigi Rao about her latest artwork and recently published book *Pulp: A Short Biography of the Banished Book, Vol. I of V*. The artist was recently in residence for Coriolis Effect III at Khoj in Delhi. Rao looked at the Indian Ocean world by constructing a biographical account of migrating islands and language shifts, the restless mutability of knowledge, and the absurd geopolitics of impertinent outcrops. Based on an essay she wrote a few years ago, the work began with the Ptolemaic description of mythical

Taprobane, an island that would reappear in very different places on maps through the centuries, and was the stuff of much speculation. This perpetually peripatetic migrating island was fabled for its natives who had a forked tongue, using one branch to speak with one person, and the other to speak with another. There are many things to unpack here, from the geek-trivia of it being a possible inspiration for the island in *Lost*, to its very troubling ethnographic and imperialist recording. Multiple references crash through the work — from natural history, Darwin, historical, literary

and popular cultural taxonomies of monsters, modern-day shipping and barnacles.

VIOLENCE

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.

-Shubigi Rao, *Bastardising Biography*, monograph (2006)

Bharti Lalwani (BL): You are three years into your decade long project *Pulp: A Short Biography of*

the Banished Book, that is steadily taking shape as an amalgamation of artworks, interviews, installations, film and five self-published volumes — the first of which is out. What was the impetus for a project that would span over a decade to come together?

Shubigi Rao (SR):

A ten-year project started in 2014, *Pulp: A Short Biography of the Banished Book* is ostensibly about book and

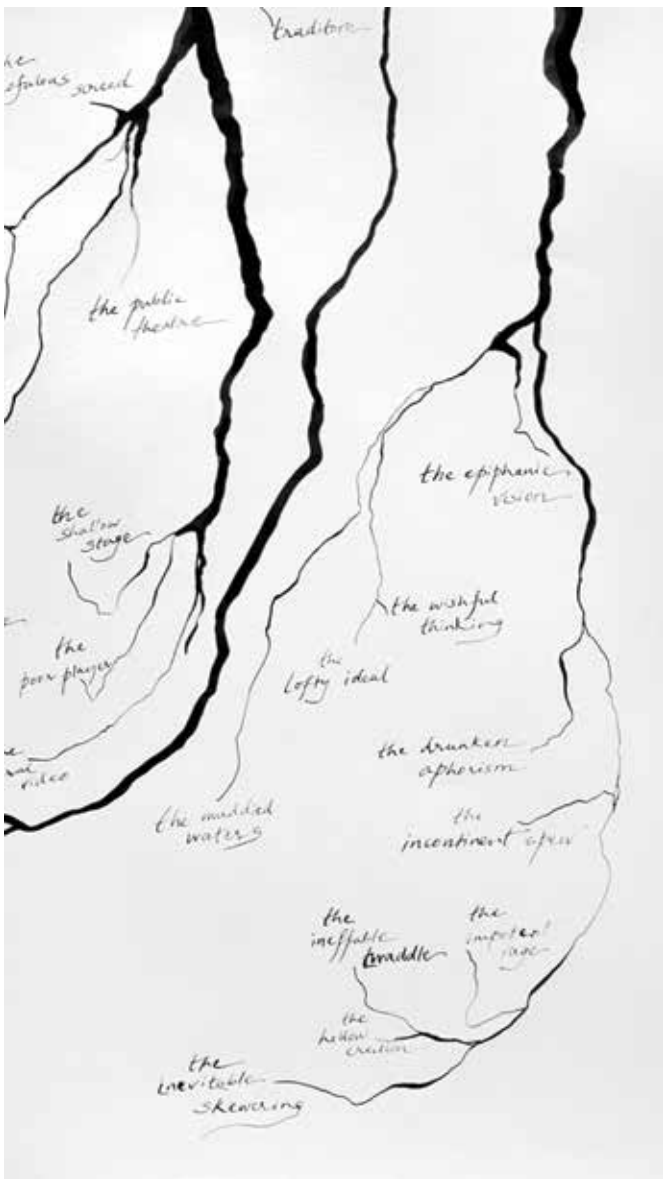
library destruction and censorship. I'm writing a five-volume book series, making artwork, and a film based on my travel and research, field interviews and filming people and sites globally, concerning stories of book and library destruction, censorship, banning, and the book as resistance.

The project also looks at the history of language shifts, the importance of translation, interspecies communication, print history, online access, marginalia, the systemic silencing historically of women and other groups, as well as the book as resistance. It involves connecting with specialists across disparate fields, navigating differing obstacles to accessing scientific and other research and knowledge in different countries, the various forms of growing control over media (print and online), and corporate and state collusions concerning privacy, data, and access. As for the impetus behind the project: The loss of my family library, the global, unceasing destruction of culture (books, libraries, museums and cultural forms), of people, and of the natural world, as well as a growing disenchantment with neoliberal forms of cultural production, the growing importance of online access to information, knowledge, etc. (which is still unequal and exploitative).

All these things are a source of great sorrow personally, but I'm also emboldened and heartened by the historical solidarity of the print community, especially in the face of banning and repression, as well as the way librarians and other custodians of knowledge have resisted attempts to destroy, silence or impoverish libraries and public collections. I also wanted to look at history not only through rise and fall of empire, but also through the migration of language, and the ebb and flow of cultural, mathematical, scientific, philosophical ideas through translations of text, through trade in books and texts, and in repositories and access.

BL: The research required is quite expansive. How do you connect with various specialists and gain access to specific collections?

SR: As an artist project, *'Pulp'* relies almost wholly on the kinship between those who recognise the various forms of the assault on print and online media. One of the aims of the project is to explore the connective tissue that exists between artists, writers, printers, academics, bibliophiles, shadow library activists, librarians and other cultural custodians, and various defenders and supporters of print, speech, and open access to knowledge. The project is almost completely dependent on networking



Detail from 'Being a Brief Guide to the Banished Book', from *Written in the Margins*, part of 'Pulp: A Short Biography of the Banished Book', Kunstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, 2017.



Detail from *Written in the Margins*, part of 'Pulp: A Short Biography of the Banished Book', Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, 2017

directly with people to make face-to-face connections possible. All the participants in the film, for example, were reached through conversations with people who were drawn to the project through word of mouth, talks, presentations, and studio visits, and who then later introduce other relevant people. This form of connecting cannot be emphasised enough – I have been able to gain access to materials and special collections in institutional and university libraries that would normally be off-limits to an artist who works without institutional backing. I have been able to work with and interview private individuals whose stories are of critical importance, but are not often heard, solely through the introductions and recommendations of other individuals. For example, I was able to interview fire-fighters, actors, and concerned citizens who helped defend cultural treasures during the siege of Sarajevo.

The importance of networking between writers, academics,

scholars, librarians, curators and historians, among others, is not only crucial to the project, but is of critical importance to the discussion of knowledge generation, archiving, safeguarding, and access, and for formulating new forms of activism internationally. The first volume of the five book series was published in Singapore in 2016, and the second volume will be released in January 2018.

BL: In the Introduction you note that all books are 'predestined ashes' - do I sense pessimism? Could you define for me what 'Pulp' is - and why you have decided upon five volumes instead of compiling your research into one convenient book?

SR: As you may have guessed, this isn't really a book about the history of book and library destruction. There are a host of issues here – and despite the wide-ranging, discursive and sometimes investigative nature of the content I can honestly say that the first volume feels more like a large introduction. The title itself contains several clues to the true nature of the project – the word 'pulp' isn't only about the destructive pulping of printed matter, but also refers to paper pulp as source material (a cyclic ashes to ashes, dust to dust sentiment perhaps), as well as a nod to pulp fiction (which indicates that hierarchies are important

– the lowly broadside ballad, pamphlet, marginalia, all have immense value to scholars and anyone interested in how people lived, resisted, their humour, rage and pleasures). Pulp also alludes to my tendency to deprecate everything I do – and I do believe that this endeavour will meet the same fate. All books are predestined ashes, statistically speaking, and yes, this pessimism will last as long as our species continues to revel in destruction.

BL: You have attempted to bind together a broad range of issues concerning the written word. It is not as simple as putting forth a discussion on recently banned books but an investigation of oppressed voices as well as dissenting ones throughout humanity's recorded history. For a project this broad, where do you begin and end? Tell me about your research methodology and its intersection with your evolving art practice.

SR: In the title I deliberately use the word 'biography' rather than 'history', because I am no historian, and this is not a history. By personifying the book I can look at multiple forms of knowledge generation, access, control and abuse, while retaining my position and personal stance, a biographer's bias. I can include anecdotal evidence, which as we know is not evidence at all. It was a bit of an ironic

aside to use the word ‘short’ before biography, because while a decade-long project may seem a long commitment, given the subject it is completely insufficient.

As for research, I began from multiple entry-points – why we collect, for instance, leads into the way we revere archives, collections (libraries, museums, personal collections, a book of photographs, a boxed set), and of the nature of incompleteness and lack. This conversation naturally leads to a discussion of taxonomies and ordering, how naming is an act of ownership, and this in turn talks about hierarchies, the Enlightenment mode of observation, collecting (objects, flora and fauna, cultures, peoples) and how this aided imperial and colonising impulses.

This is addressed in the second section, which also looks at the history of print, the rise and ebb of languages, how mass printing and literacy led to renewed forms of resistance and representation, the importance of pamphleteering and marginalia, and the backlash of the fearful, whether state, church or general officious self-appointed moral police.

At this point I felt the need for a detour from the linearity of my investigation, and this is the third section, where, rather than look at

histories and narratives, I look at the way we construct them. This is something I’ve always been fascinated by – the boundless human capacity for deception, delusion and confabulation is at the bedrock of every ideological structure and belief system.

BL: Your point on deception reminds me of your art and theory production under the pseudonym S. Raoul.

SR: Yes, the first ten years of my art-making and writing was under a male *nom de plume*, S. Raoul, since it is easier to perpetuate a scientific or historical hoax if you are a male polymath. Lies and literary irony formed the methodology, as you call it, of a lot of my early work, which often came from a place of deep anger.

The fourth section is dire, and addresses the brutality of cultural desecration and destruction, and how often they accompany massacres and genocide. No one is exempt – we are all complicit in some way or another. Traumatic as this section is, it is also a blow against apathy or disclaiming responsibility.

The final section is a hopeful statement of the power of pacifism, of the book as a symbol of resistance, and about the solidarity between writers, publishers, printers, artists, librarians, online activists, bibliophiles and those who believe that the assault on culture affects us all.

All copyright: TAKE on art

BL: There are a number of your ink drawings that punctuate the text throughout this edition. Could you tell me more about the art work your research inspired? Are these drawings inseparable from the text?

SR: Drawing shares the same primary impulse as language – and to me they are inseparable. I draw and write in very different measures, and so as I write more, I find that in my more recent artwork (for ‘Pulp’) it is useful to be precise, and very spare. This is in marked contrast to my layered and complex installations that overflowed with texts, books, etchings, machines, journals, video, etc. I find myself submerged beneath the mountain of data I’m amassing, and I come up for air when I draw (with ink and other liquid media – another visual pun there). Ink and text are the fluid – meanings shift between the two, bleed into each other, and repel one another.

‘Written in the Margins’ (at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, April-May 2017) was the first formal showing of work from *Pulp*, and while there were browseable film clips as rough cuts from the masses of footage I’ve shot, there was also a large ink tree, a guide-map of sorts to the whole project.

All images courtesy: Shubigi Rao.