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DELHI, INDIEN – Midt på Lala Lajpat Rai Road sidder vi fast, rickshawchaufføren og jeg. Trafikken stopper, og det eneste, jeg kan skimte, er bilernes glatte overflade i byens tunge, tågede forurening. Nærmest som var det en kæk bemærkning fra den kunstner, jeg snart skal møde. Fotografen Gauri Gill kritiserer elegant og bidende folkevandringen til metropolerne i sine værker.

Jeg er tæt på at stige af rickshaven, men min chauffør slår ud med hånden: »Five minutes.« beroliger han. Knuden af køretøjer løsner sig efter et kvarter, og endelig står jeg ved et byhus med Gauri Gills navn på døren.

En spinkel kvinde i tøfler åbner og rækker mig uden et ord en massiv bog.

Hun må være Gauri Gills hushjælp. Den travle fotograf har takket ja til at mødes i Delhi, men inden vores interviewaftale har hun sendt mig til sin adresse for at hente en bog. Jeg har simpelthen fået lektier for. I rickshaven på vej tilbage bladrer jeg i det tykke værk, som består af Gills billedserier gennem 20 år.

Af The New York Times er Gauri Gill blevet omtalt som »en af Indiens mest respekterede fotografer«, og i den indiske presse bliver hun beskrevet som »en de mest eftertænksomme« i branchen.

Hendes værker har hængt på MoMa i New York, Documenta i Kassel, Schirn Kunsthalle i Frankfurt, og nu udstiller Louisiana i Humlebæk også Gauri Gills fotografier. Fra slutningen af januar kan man på museet nord for København se billederne, der i pressematerialet beskrives som en »skævvridning mellem centrum og periferi, mellem den moderne boom-kapitalisme i metropolerne og den indiske kulturs dybere rødder«.

Særligt en billedserie har fået verden til at tale om Gauri Gill.

Serien *Acts of appearance* er fotograferet i fjerne landsbyer i det vestlige Indien, hvor lokalsamfundene er afskåret fra omverdenen og moderne goder som rindende vand. Landsbyerne har ikke del i Indiens økonomiske oplomstring, men visner langsomt, forfalder.

De lokale på fotografierne er ikklædt papmachémasker, mens de poserer i typiske hverdagssituationer. Fejende med en *jhadu*, en kost af stive bambusgrene, eller i færd med at tilberede aftensmaden på den sandede jord. To kvinder i lysegule sarier hiver vand op af en brønd iført de pudderhvide papmachémasker.

Gills fotografier er sære og rørende. Man får en mærkelig fornemmelse af, at de portrætterede ser udfordrende tilbage på én. Flabet, ligefrem. Måske siger de: »Ha! Du skulle lige til at have ondt af mig, men du ved ikke rigtig, hvordan jeg har det. Gör du?«

Ud over bogen har Gauri Gill sendt mig et link til en video, hvor hun med langsom og stemmeføring reflekterer over sit arbejde i de stovede landområder. Hun taler om repræsentation. Om at give landsbyboere en stemme, et ansigt. Gill er vant til at fortælle historierne, fornemmer jeg. Føler hun sig beklemmet ved, at det nu er en anden, der fører pennen – og former teksten? Er det derfor, hun har givet mig et pensum inden interviewet?

GAURI GILL GRINER, da vi to uger senere mødes på en café i det sydlige Delhi: »Jamen jeg er her jo. Jeg har bare forsøgt at forhandle mine vilkår.« siger hun og refererer til bogen, videoen og kravet om at få sine citater til tæk. »Men det er dig, der har magten i denne situation. Det er din historie.«

Hvordan har du det med det, spørger jeg.

Hun tøver et øjeblik:

»Gennem min praksis har jeg følt et stort ansvar for de mennesker, jeg portrætterer. Jeg har mærket vægten af det ansvar, og for mig er repræsentation stadig et stort, åbent spørgsmål. Kan man gengive et andet menneskes liv? Jeg kan knap nok fremstille mig selv troværdigt.«

Gauri Gill sidder med overkroppen lænet ind over bordet som for at sikre sig, at hendes pointer skærer gennem caféstøj. Den 53-årige fotograf har en ungdommelig udstråling. Håret er slået ud, og hun taler livligt, i lange, fortællende sætninger. Bag glasruden glider Delhis umulige trafik forbi og får næsten den støjende café til at føles som en rolig oase.

Gauri Gill er hjemmevant i de indiske metropolers mylder, hun er vokset op i nordindiske storbyer. Familien flyttede rundt efter farens arbejde, og selvom bedsteforældrene kom fra små flækker, kendte Gill ikke rigtig til livet uden for de grelt oplyste byer.

Først da hun som voksen blev ansat ved et indisk nyhedsmagasin og udsendt som fotojournalist, begyndte hun at dokumentere hverdagen i de fattige landområder. Der var lidelse, der var fastømrerede hierarkier; klasse, kaste, køn. Der var efterladte kvinder. Og der var mændene, som drog mod metropolerne og efterlod landsbyerne udtynkede, forklarer Gill.

Nyhedsmagasinet havde sin ugentlige rytme; journalister og fotografer blev sendt ud om mandagen, var tilbage om torsdagen, så historien var klar om fredagen. En uge lavede de en historie om en landmand, der havde begået selvmord, fordi høsten slog fejl, og pengene ikke rakte. De besøgte hans hjem, hans landsby, talte med de lokale.

»Men vi vendte aldrig tilbage og fandt ud af, hvordan historien udviklede sig. Hvordan påvirkede selvmordet landsbyen et år efter? Jeg havde en stærk fornemmelse af, at vi aldrig helt forstod, hvad der foregik – og en forfærdelig trang til at grave mig dybere ned, til at forstå virkeligheden og de mennesker, der levede i den,« siger hun.

En episode i en landsby i Rajasthan fik den repetitive nyheds-



Untitled (74) fra serien *Acts of Appearance*, 2015. © Gauri Gill



Untitled (9) fra serien *Acts of Appearance*, 2015. © Gauri Gill

MASKERET ■ »Hvem tilhører vores ansigt – os selv eller den verden, som betragter os?« Den indiske fotograf Gauri Gill om repræsentation, identitet og friheden til at bryde med det hele.

At eje sin papmachémaske

cyklus til at forekomme ubærlig. Det var vinter, og børnene fra landsbyen fik undervisning på taget af skolebygningen. Læreren havde en pind i hånden, som han pludselig begyndte at tæve en lille pige med.

Gauri Gill overværede episoden, som var så brutal, at hun foreslog sin redaktør at lave et fotoessay fra landsbyen. Hun ville dokumentere livet som pige i det konservative Rajasthan. Redaktøren afslog, han savnede en nyhedskrog, og Gauri Gill tog orlov, rejste ud på egen hånd.

Hun satte et fotostudie op i en øde ørkenlandsby, og piger og kvinder kom ind for at få taget deres portrætter. »Jeg har fået taget et billede, og hver gang folk ser det, vil de tænke på mig,« er en af pigerne citeret for at sige i det, der senere blev til portrætserien *Balika Mela*.

Studiet var en måde at gøre landsbyens kvinder synlige på, forklarer Gill, som begyndte at eksperimentere med interaktionen mellem sig selv, kameraet og de fotograferede. Hun instruerede ikke de lokale, men lod dem posere, som de ville. Hånd i hånd, alene, med en avis, på en motorcykel, med en kuffert i favnen.

ET STED I DEN TYKKE BOG om Gills arbejde er det beskrevet, at hun bruger sin tid i landsbyerne til at nedbryde distancen mellem sig selv og lokalbefolkningen. Det får mig til at tænke på hendes berømte fotoserie med papmachémaskerne. Hvorfor fotograferer de lokale ikklædt masker, spørger jeg. Skaber det ikke det modsatte, en distance?

»Maskerne ændrer vilkårene,« svarer Gill. »Jeg er meget bevidst om den magt, jeg har, når jeg kommer med mit kamera. Og jeg forsøger konstant at udfordre eller ændre den position. I serien med maskerne tager de portrætterede magten tilbage. De tager ejerskab over deres ansigter. Ingen ved, hvad der foregår bag facaden. Om de rækker tunge, smiler, græder, sover.«

Lokale kunstnere kreerede maskerne, som er inspireret af den lokale Bahoda-festival.

»Festivalens modeller er meget spektakulære,« siger Gill og illustrerer de overgjorte ansigtstræk med hænderne. »De forestiller guder med guld og glitter. Jeg undrede mig over, hvorfor der ikke er masker af almindelige mennesker.«

Gill hørte om en berømt maskekunstner, Dharmu Kadu, hvis sønner fortsatte traditionen med at fremstille maskerne til festivalen.

»Jeg spurgte, om de ikke kunne lave masker, der i stedet for at skildre det guddommelige kunne illustrere det almindelige. De velkendte ansigter – naboens ansigt – almindelige livsfaser, følelser og hverdagslignende begivenheder. De sagde: 'Vi kan lave hvad som helst, men kan du give os en prøve?' Jeg sagde: 'Der er ingen prøve. De eksisterer ikke engang i mit hoved!'«

De lokale kunstnere endte med at male maskerne ud fra de ni følelser i *rasa* – traditionelt indisk skuespil: kærlighed, humor, sorg, vrede, entusiasme, frygt, foragt, forbløffelse og frigørelse.

Gauri Gill samlede omtrent 40 mennesker fra de omkringliggende landsbyer til at skabe fotografierne. Hun betalte dem, som var de almindelige skuespillere. Landsbyen udgjorde fotografiernes kulisse; skoler, hospitaler, busstoppesteder, kiosker, grøntmarkeder. Der var intet manuskript, det hele var improviseret. En kunne sige: »Nu er jeg lærer!« og sætte sig bag katederet.

»Hele ideen var at lege med identitet og sociale roller. I Indien, især i landsbysamfundene, er folk fastlåst i en social identitet. Er du mor eller den ældste søn? Er du fra en høj kaste eller en lav kaste? Jeg ville gerne eksperimentere med de identiteter og vise, at ingen er reduceret til én rolle.«

Gills fotografier indeholder også politiske kommentarer: Et fotografi viser en lang kø til banken og er fra dengang, Modi-regeringen afskaffede 2.000-rupier sedlen for at bekæmpe korruption i landet. Tiltaget viste sig at gå hårdt ud over de lavest betalte, som tjente deres penge fra dag til dag, og regeringen måtte genindføre sedlen. Et andet fotografi viser en mand veje løg på en vægt og er en reference til en periode, hvor løgene blev voldsomt dyre på grund af tørke. Fotografiet af kvinderne i gule sarier ved brønden er en reference til den store vandkrise i Indien, som har rod i klimaforandringer og igen går hårdt ud over befolkningerne i landområderne.

Men udfordrer Gill ikke dokumentargenren ved at iscenesætte sine fotografier så markant?

»Der er tydeligt for alle, at maskerne er iscenesat. Men kulisserne har jeg ikke pillet ved. Når vi ikke længere ser ansigtet, rykker vores fokus sig til andre steder på billedet. Vi bliver pludselig mere bevidste om omgivelserne,« siger Gill.

»Mit formål har hele tiden været at vise hverdagen uden for de magtfulde metropol; at vise ganske almindelige situationer. Mændene spiller kort, kvinderne fejrer gulv, og jo, så har de en maske på, men det fortæller os stadig noget om kønsrollerne de steder.«

Jeg fortæller Gauri Gill om min oplevelse af, at personer på fotografierne ser tilbage på én med et kækt udtryk, nærmest som bliver man konfronteret med sine for-

domme om livet i en fattig indisk landsby. »Det var meget vigtigt for mig, at fotografierne ikke skulle vække medlidenhed. Jeg ville gerne vise de lokales styrke, at de formår at holde sig oven vande trods barske vilkår. Og samtidig prikke til publikums forestillinger, så det er helt bevidst,« smiler Gill og fortsætter:

»Du kan endda tænke på ansigtet som en slags maske. Hvem tilhører vores ansigt – os selv eller den verden, som betragter os?«

»I hele vores samtale har du set på mig og mit ansigt, og jeg har set på dig og dit ansigt. På den måde har jeg jo tolket mere ud af dit ansigt end af mit eget.«

Ved cafébordene omkring os begynder folk så småt at rejse sig, tage jakkerne fra stoleryggen og iføre sig mundbindene mod forurening. Langs den ene væg hænger tre store spejle. I et af dem kan jeg skimte mit eget ansigt; jeg har et alvorligt udtryk og blussende kinder.

I virkeligheden sætter Gill ikke i scene, siger hun. Hun giver mennesker frihed til at sætte sig selv i scene – eller sætte deres egen scene.

English Translation –

Weekendavisen 

27 January, 2023 | By **Sonja Furu**

MASKED "Who does our face belong to – ourselves or the world that watches us?" Indian photographer Gauri Gill on representation, identity and the freedom to break with it all.

Owning your papier-mâché mask

DELHI, INDIA – In the middle of Lala Lajpat Rai Road, the rickshaw driver and I are stuck. The traffic stops and all I can make out is the smooth surface of the cars in the heavy, hazy pollution of the city. Almost as if it were a cheeky remark from the artist I'm about to meet. Photographer Gauri Gill criticizes the migration of people to the metropolises in her work.

I'm about to get off the rickshaw, but my driver waves his hand: "Five minutes," he reassures me. The knot of rickshaws loosens after 15 minutes, and finally I'm standing at a townhouse with Gauri Gill's name on the door.

A slender woman in slippers opens and hands me a massive book without a word.

She must be Gauri Gill's housekeeper. The busy photographer has agreed to meet in Delhi, but before our interview she has sent me to her address to pick up a book. I've simply got homework too. In the rickshaw on the way back, I leaf through the thick volume, which consists of Gill's photo series over 20 years.

Gauri Gill has been described by The New York Times as "one of India's most respected photographers" and in the Indian press as "one of the most thoughtful" in the industry.

Her work has hung in MoMa in New York, Documenta in Kassel, Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, and now Louisiana in Humlebæk is also exhibiting Gauri Gill's photographs. From the end of January, the museum north of Copenhagen will be showing the works, described in the press material as a "dichotomy between centre and periphery, between the modern capitalism of the metropolis and the deeper roots of Indian culture".

One series of images in particular has got the world talking about Gauri Gill. The Acts of Appearance series is photographed in remote villages in western India, where local communities are cut off from the outside world and modern amenities like running water. The villages do not share in India's economic boom, but are slowly withering, decaying.

The locals in the photographs are dressed in papier-mâché masks as they pose in typical everyday situations. Sweeping with a jhadu, a broom made of stiff bamboo branches, or preparing the evening meal on the sandy soil. Two women in pale yellow saris pull water from a well wearing the powder-white papier-mâché masks.

Gill's photographs are strange and moving. You get a strange sense that the people portrayed are looking back at you defiantly. Blunt, straightforward. Maybe they're saying: "Ha! You were about to feel sorry for me, but you don't really know how I feel. Do you?"

In addition to the book, Gauri Gill has sent me a link to a video, in which she reflects on her work in the dusty countryside. She talks about representation. About giving villagers a voice, a face. Gill is used to telling the stories, I sense. Is she troubled by the fact that someone else is now leading the pen - and shaping the text? Is that why she gave me a syllabus before the interview?

GAURI GILL LAUGHS when we meet two weeks later at a café in south Delhi: "Well, I'm here. I've just been trying to negotiate my terms," she says, referring to the book, the video and the demand to have her quotes checked. "But you're the one with the power in this situation. It's your story."

How do you feel about that, I ask.

She hesitates for a moment:

"Through my practice, I have felt a great responsibility for the people I portray. I have felt the weight of that responsibility, and for me representation is still a big, open question. Can you reproduce another person's life? I can barely portray myself credibly."

Gauri Gill sits with her upper body leaning over the table, as if to make sure her points cut through the café dust. The 53-year-old photographer has a youthful air. Her hair is tousled and she speaks animatedly, in long, telling sentences.

Behind the glass window, Delhi's impossible traffic glides by, almost making the noisy café feel like a tranquil oasis.

Gauri Gill is at home in the bustle of Indian metropolises, having grown up in North Indian cities. The family moved around for her father's job, and although her grandparents came from small towns, Gill didn't really know life outside the glaringly bright cities.

It wasn't until she joined an Indian news magazine as an adult and was sent out as a photojournalist that she began documenting everyday life in poor rural areas. There was suffering, there were entrenched hierarchies; class, caste, gender. There were neglected women. And there were the men who headed for the metropolises, leaving the villages thinned out, Gill explains.

The news magazine had its weekly rhythm; reporters and photographers were sent out on Mondays, were back on Thursdays, so the story was ready on Fridays. One week they did a story about a farmer who had committed suicide because the harvest failed and the money wasn't enough. They visited his home, his village, talked to the locals.

"But we never went back and found out how the story unfolded. How did the suicide affect the village a year later? I had a strong feeling that we never fully understood what was going on – and a terrible urge to dig deeper, to understand reality and the people who lived in it," she says.

An incident in a village in Rajasthan made the repetitive news cycle seem unbearable. It was winter, and the children of the village were being taught on the roof of the school building. The teacher had a stick in his hand with which he suddenly began to beat a little girl.

Gauri Gill witnessed the incident, which was so brutal that she suggested to her editor that she do a photo essay from the village. She wanted to document life as a girl in conservative Rajasthan. The editor refused, he needed a news hook, and Gauri Gill took leave, travelled out on her own.

She set up a photo studio in a desert village, and girls and women came in to have their portraits taken. "I've had a picture taken, and every time people see it, they want to think of me," one of the girls is quoted as saying in what later became the portrait series *Balika Mela*.

The studio was a way to make the women of the village visible, explains Gill, who began experimenting with the interaction between herself, the camera and the photographed. She did not direct the locals, but let them pose as they wished. Hand in hand, alone, with a newspaper, on a motorbike, carrying a suitcase.

ANYWHERE IN THE THICK BOOK of Gill's work, it is described that she uses her time in the villages to break down the distance between herself and the local people. It makes me think of her famous series of photos of the papier-mâché masks. Why photograph the locals dressed in masks, I ask. Doesn't it create the opposite, a distance?

"The masks change the conditions," Gill replies. "I'm very conscious of the power I have when I come with my camera. And I'm constantly trying to challenge or change that position. In the series with the masks, the

subjects take back the power. They take ownership of their faces. Nobody knows what's going on behind the façade. Whether they're sticking their tongues out, smiling, crying, sleeping."

Local artists created the masks, which are inspired by the local Bohada festival.

"The festival models are very spectacular," Gill says, illustrating the over-drawn facial features with her hands. "They depict gods with gold and glitter. I wondered why there are no masks of ordinary people."

Gill heard about a famous mask artist, Dharma Kadu, whose sons continued the tradition of making the masks for the festival.

"I asked if they could make masks that, instead of depicting the divine, could illustrate the ordinary. The familiar faces - the neighbour's face - ordinary life experiences, emotions and everyday events. They said, 'We can do anything, but can you give us a sample?' I said, 'There is no sample. They don't even exist in my head!'"

The local artists ended up painting the masks based on the nine emotions or *rasa* – from traditional Indian acting: love, humour, sadness, anger, enthusiasm, fear, contempt, amazement and liberation.

Gauri Gill gathered about 40 people from the surrounding villages to create the photographs. She paid them as if they were ordinary actors. The village formed the backdrop to the photographs; schools, hospitals, bus stops, kiosks, vegetable markets. There was no script, everything was improvised. One might say: "Now I'm a teacher!" and sit behind the desk.

"The whole idea was to play with identity and social roles. In India, especially in rural communities, people are locked into a social identity. Are you a mother or the eldest son? Are you from a high caste or a low caste? I wanted to experiment with those identities and show that no one is reduced to one role."

Gill's photographs also contain political commentary: one photograph shows a long queue to the bank and is from the time the Modi government abolished the 2,000 rupee note to fight corruption in the country. The move proved to be hard on the lowest paid, who earned their money from day to day, and the government had to reintroduce the note. Another photograph shows a man weighing onions on a scale and is a reference to a period when onions became hugely expensive due to drought. The photograph of the women in yellow saris at the well is a reference to the major water crisis in India, which is rooted in climate change and is once again taking its toll on rural populations.

But doesn't Gill challenge the documentary genre by staging her photographs so strikingly?

"It's obvious to everyone that the masks are staged. But I haven't tampered with the costumes. When we no longer see the face, our focus moves to other places in the picture. We suddenly become more aware of our surroundings," says Gill.

"My aim has always been to show everyday life outside the powerful metropolises; to show ordinary situations. The men are playing cards, the women are sweeping the floor, and yes, they're wearing masks, but it still tells us something about gender roles in those places."

I tell Gauri Gill about my impression that the people in the photographs are looking back at you with a coy expression, almost as if you are being confronted with your prejudices about life in a poor Indian village.

"It was very important to me that the photographs should not arouse pity. I wanted to show the strength of the locals, that they manage to stay afloat despite harsh conditions. And at the same time to poke at the audience's perceptions, so it's quite deliberate," Gill smiles and continues:

"You can even think of the face as a kind of mask. Who does our face belong to - ourselves or the world watching us?"

"Throughout our conversation, you've been looking at me and my face, and I've been looking at you and your face. In this way, I have interpreted more from your face than from my own."

At the café tables around us, people slowly begin to stand up, take their jackets off the backs of their chairs and put on their anti-pollution masks. Three large mirrors hang along one wall. In one of them I can see my own face; I have a serious expression and flushing cheeks.

In reality, Gill doesn't stage, she says. She gives people the freedom to stage themselves - or set their own scene.

GAURI GILL (born 1970) lives in New Delhi, India. She graduated in photography from Parsons School of Design and Stanford University in the United States. For five years she worked as a photojournalist for Indian news media before she quit her job in 1999 to document life in rural India.