

PALLAVI PAUL



Portrait of Pallavi Paul. Photo by Tenzing Lekmon. Courtesy/
Khoj International Artists Association, New Delhi.

PALLAVI PAUL, *Shabakashi (A Dictionary)*, 2013, still from single-channel screen
high-definition video with sound. 13 min. Courtesy the artist and Project 88, Mumbai.

Screen Studies

BY KERSTIN WINKING

The heat was almost paralyzing on the day I first met Pallavi Paul in the gardens of the Crafts Museum in New Delhi, about two years ago. Seemingly unaffected by the temperature, she was full of energy and immediately delved into film theory, history and space travel—all passions that inform her video-art practice. That Paul is a busy woman was clear from the start. Along with pursuing her PhD in cinema studies from the School of Arts and Aesthetics at New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), she regularly participates in exhibitions, most recently at the 2016 edition of Newcastle's AV Festival, a biennial event featuring contemporary art, film and music in northeast England. She is also a generous contributor to social media, often sharing articles and posting comments about the recent protests against state censorship at JNU, and occasionally blogs for Indian outlets *Kafila* and *Hard News Magazine*.

Born and raised in New Delhi, Paul said she had always been a lover of books and that her first degree was in literature. Among the texts that stood out particularly was Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), a psychoanalytic study of international civil-rights, anticolonial and black-consciousness movements. For the artist, Fanon's interest in the power of language, questions about who is speaking that language, and the violence of which language is capable were all ideas that would find their way into her later video works. In 2008, she attended AJK Mass Communication Research Centre, where she earned her master's degree in mass communication, at a time when the pioneering documentary filmmaker John Grierson shaped the institution's curriculum. Grierson had been close friends with James Beveridge, one of the school's founders who had spent many years living and working in India as a documentary-maker, as well as an instructor in film practice and television technologies. Like Grierson, Beveridge believed documentary could create possibilities to trigger social change, a view that Paul also shares.

Although her graduate studies armed her with filmmaking know-how, Paul decided not to join India's thriving movie industry. She had seen the work of acclaimed video artist Amar Kanwar circulating in film

festivals in New Delhi as single-screen documentaries and as a part of installations in exhibition spaces, and found the multiple formats of his projects interesting. As a sideline to her studies, she also worked as an editor in the studio of Raqs Media Collective, who also switch between producing documentaries and installation art. So after completing her master's, Paul turned to the visual arts as a more fertile, interdisciplinary field for her ideas.

As a result of these experiences and influences, Paul's documentary-style video installations and single-screen works are studies on the potential of language to shape social identities. However, the artist breaks with the Griersonian approach, which tends to idealize working-class life. Instead, Paul's videos involve experimentation in storytelling and poetry and, as she explained, are "not making simple connections between reality and documentary." For her, documentary means "resistance, possibility, a second horizon on which things can happen." In her work, themes are always approached from different perspectives by means of montage—her way of breaking up unilateral narrative structures.

Early experimentations were *Nayi Kheti* (*New Harvest*) (2013) and *Shabdkosh* (*A Dictionary*) (2013), some of Paul's first video works included at the 2013 group exhibition "Word. Sound. Power." at Tate Modern's project space. Both videos center around the late Indian poet and cultural activist Vidrohi (1957–2015), who vehemently advocated ideas of Marxist socialism. He lived the life of a vagabond on the JNU campus for three decades, participating in student protests and reciting revolutionary poetry. Filming obsessively for weeks on end, Paul captured images and sound recordings of Vidrohi and his performances shortly before he died, elements that she then combined with footage found online or in film and photography archives. In *Nayi Kheti*, Paul tests the possibilities of film to reanimate spirits of the dead. In *Shabdkosh*, she explores the idea of a person's final act, using as an example fragments of former Chilean president Salvador Allende's famous last speech, delivered right before he shot himself during the 1973 Chilean coup d'état. References to other poets are also

abundant in both works, such as a fictional exchange of letters between Federico García Lorca and Jack Spicer. The films, as a result, are poetic montages of written texts, images accompanied alternately by spoken words, music and silence. In the catalog for the Tate exhibition, Paul describes her films as an experiment with "poetry, time travel and the possibilities of metaphysical conversations between the ghosts of poets living through different epochs of history."

Paul completed her Vidrohi trilogy in 2014 with *Long Hair*, *Short Ideas*. Though Vidrohi himself appears, this time the spotlight falls on his wife Shanti who tells fragments of her life story directly into Paul's camera. In the name of devoting his life to ideology, Vidrohi had abandoned his young wife and children. As she reflects in *Long Hair*, *Short Ideas*, despite her hardships, Shanti persevered and thrived. Archival footage reveals her own involvement with political protests against state censorship and for women's rights in India in the 1970s. Though socialist rhetoric features heavily across the trilogy, Paul's films are meditations on the greater notions of life, evanescence and struggle.

The last time we talked, early in March of this year, Paul told me about the protests at JNU against the current oppressive politics of President Modi. She joined the movement after the arrest of current president of JNU Students' Union Kanhaiya Kumar; he was charged with commemorating the death of Kashmiri separatist Afzal Guru, which the government deemed an act of sedition. Paul was also enraged over the way the government had implemented police action against student protesters on the basis of a law enacted by the British colonial government in the 1870s, which was used against Indian freedom fighters, most famously in the 1920s against Mahatma Gandhi. The artist considered this a violation of free speech and wondered what it means to be nationalist these days. What Indian society will become, it seemed to her, depends on its people's active engagement with political processes. Through her poetic documentaries, Paul sets a fine example, making her voice heard and representing the sociopolitical complexities within a society in flux.