

LONDON STOKES NEWINGTON 08.2010

EXT: OUTSIDE THE OTOLITH GROUP'S STUDIO. A light, breezy day. KODWO and ANJALIKA take a break from preparations for The Turner Prize.



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Nominated for this year’s Turner Prize, **THE OTOLITH GROUP** rearrange history in film essays laden with documentary footage, emigrants’ home movies and speculative science fiction. Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar discuss how they have helped to transform our ideas about what it means to be a modern artist.

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“WHEN WE STARTED GOING AROUND THE WORLD – WHETHER IT WAS GERMANY OR CHINA, ARMENIA, AMERICA OR KOLKATA – WE FOUND PEOPLE WHO SHARED OUR ENTHUSIASM AND IT WAS LIKE WE WERE ALL EXILES, TOGETHER.” – KODWO ESHUN

The leafy north London street where the Otolith Group live and work is quiet, almost genteel. Behind a substantial door, the house is filled with the traffic of voices and ideas: musicians are recording future soundtracks in a garden studio; a visiting editor of art books lopes amiably in and out of high-ceilinged rooms lined with books, DVDs and vinyl; a gallery director is having a glass of wine and a chat with Anjalika Sagar and an Otolith Group assistant, while her partner Kodwo Eshun doodles a chemical formula on an otherwise blank page. He pauses and looks up from the drawing. “We all grew up watching the young British artists, where there was a sense that you had to perform the role of an artist for the media, to create a sensation around your work to generate excitement and make those objects valuable,” he explains. The Otolith Group doesn’t strike that pose. “I always liked artists that weren’t in that hysterical mode and didn’t pander to the limelight. In the beginning, we didn’t worry so much about our position in the art world because we thought the work would generate its own following. It happened, but it took a long time!” Named after a tiny crystal nestled deep in the inner ear that governs the individual’s relationship with balance and gravity, the Otolith Group’s films about possible and impossible worlds depict places at once historic and futuristic. “It’s a representation of the way we talk about disorientation and our relationship to the ground,” says Kodwo. “The Otolith allows us to frame a discussion about who we are and where we’re from. It reminds us how enigmatic and alien human beings really are.” There are elements of science fiction – referencing both JG Ballard’s everyday dystopias set five minutes in the almost-recognisable future and proper, rocket-to-the-stars space opera. *The Otolith Series*, winking at SF franchise traditions, is a film trilogy linking past, present and future. The barrage of ideas and parade of images in the films are meant to be transient, observed and recycled into new narratives – and because their practice is about putting alternate interpretations of history into public space instead of making pieces available in a commercial gallery, nothing’s for sale.

When Londoners were riding the boom to the bitter end, Kodwo and Anjali were dreaming of ways to create and escape. Kodwo was a contributing editor to i-D and the author of *More Brilliant Than The Sun*, a critically acclaimed journey into Afro-futurism across modern music, narrative and art. Anjali was working as a freelance producer of exhibitions. Both longed to make films. “We met in 2001; our first date was going to see Chris Marker films at the ICA,” Anjali laughs; ‘essay films’ such as *Marker’s Sans Soleil* and a shared enthusiasm for the Black Audio Film Collective wound up informing the duo’s practice when they decided to transform their relationship into an artistic collaboration later that year. “We got talking and realised in both of our different ways that the essay film answered a relationship between image, text and documentary – and a kind of dissatisfaction with the way history is narrated, especially from different parts of the world. For us, it was an interesting way for us to deal with politics and aesthetics and held for us this potential we both wanted to explore.”

Today, the art world is a very different beast from the one greeting young people in the 1990s, which is why the Otolith Group’s films and curatorial projects have struck a chord in these austere, serious times. Now, the energy revitalising art is in performance and new ways of mixing contemporary art disciplines – the pendulum has swung back towards artists with global concerns, making more contemplative work that attempts to reframe the individual’s relationship to the world. Anjali, who comes from a well-known Indian family of artists, documentarists and activists, says both were keen to explore the history of self-determination in ‘developing’ nations and the resonance of stories that were often personal. “Particularly, we were interested in Marxist nationalists who were reacting to de-colonisation and capitalism, and how to marry these two ideas together in order to develop independently, but also in alliance with each other – as countries like Vietnam, Indonesia, India and Ghana were trying to do. We were both interested in these histories because our families were involved in political movements in Ghana and India. These histories and politics are also abstract in many ways; they are not easily recalled.”

An anthropology graduate, Anjali spent her twenty-something years travelling and making music, finally returning to a London in the midst of the contemporary art boom. After winning a place on a prestigious art-world diversity scheme for young creative producers, she’d found a disillusioning lack of structure once participants got to their desks. “When I met Kodwo, he said ‘All these problems are material that you can use. You mustn’t think of yourself as a minority, but as part of an elite that doesn’t know it yet.’”

Laughing, Kodwo recognises the sentiment. “And the majority of people spend a lot of time trying to make sure you never find out! That makes a lot of sense to me. It’s a mental shift that you make to help navigate the world you’re in, and once you start doing that, there’s no going back. It helps, and people who relate to that find you and offer their help. Once we realised our discontents and dissatisfactions, we realised we could turn that into usable material.” Installed as a lecturer at Goldsmith’s College – he leads an MA in Aural and Visual Cultures – Kodwo still had ambitions beyond the confines of academia. “As a lecturer for hire, I was always moving between the worlds of new media and critical theory, giving presentations – we called it the rubber chicken guru circuit,” he jokes. “Instead of being at the mercy of invitations, we wanted to generate them. Instead of a dissipated, separated, atomised response, where you’d find yourself trying to be all things to all people, it allowed things to accumulate and build up a plane of consistency. The idea of the Otolith Group as this umbrella, which could consolidate and support every activity, made a lot of sense. Calling ourselves a group was a way of giving us courage and the confidence to do new things. We sounded and felt more powerful than we were.” “This is a very critical time,” warns Anjali, who felt from the outset that creativity tied too tightly to commercial needs is not really creative at all. “The art world could be subsumed



Still from *Otolith III*, 2009

by the market, but there’s excitement because, to us, it feels like there’s a movement against that.” After a year of compiling notebooks full of ideas – and ideals – about the forms the Otolith Group would assume, Kodwo and Anjali submitted a proposal to visit Star City, the cosmonaut centre outside Moscow, to take part in microgravity training offered by Arts Catalyst, an East London organisation putting artists in touch with scientists. “When most artists go into microgravity, the whole project begins and ends with their experience. A select handful of lucky artists get to fool around in microgravity and everybody else gets to watch,” Kodwo sighs. To work as an artistic endeavour, the pair needed to anchor the weightlessness on offer to a more substantial idea that respected the seriousness of the times. “This was 2003, just before the Iraq War, so it seemed like a ridiculous and narcissistic thing for us to be doing. After talking it through, we decided to construct a relation between this artistic experience and the concrete fact of this imminent war – specifically the demonstrations in February 2003 that everyone we know went on.” Suddenly, Anjali and Kodwo had become art filmmakers essaying a kaleidoscopic view of human development and frailty. Instead of meeting the challenge of microgravity training with a 2001-style foetal roll, they returned from Moscow with enough material to inform the trilogy that led them on a wild journey around the world and on their way to this year’s Turner Prize shortlist. “When we started going around the world – whether it was Germany or China, Armenia, America or Kolkata – we found people who shared our enthusiasm and it was like we were all exiles, together,” continues a delighted Kodwo.

The films themselves are an exquisite odyssey: *Otolith I* portrays 22nd century life, when space-born human beings mutate as a result of their birth into weightlessness. Anjali created a notional descendent, Dr. Usha Adebaran-Sagar, a cosmonaut who is unable to live on her grandparents’ Earth because zero gravity impacts the formation of the otolith crystal in each ear. Usha narrates the near future as if it were the past; historical footage of Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space, is cut against anti-war demonstrations from 2003. *Otolith II* explores extreme gravity and working conditions, linking an account of the meeting between Tereshkova and Anjali’s grandmother – a former president of India’s National Federation of Women – to sweatshop capitalism and the larger history of international feminism, while *Otolith III* recovers a fragment of an unrealised science-fiction script by the Bengali director Satyajit Ray, where the alien is abstract and registered with atmospheric shifts. “I don’t think you can change history’s course, but there aren’t a lot of people like us who do what we do,” says Anjali matter-of-factly. “If we can help things change, it’s by giving younger people a way in to thinking about things that could become hard for them to deal with. Increasingly, issues of migration, politics and religion are becoming so heavy, the world is getting to be a hard place to live in. If I was a young Indian girl trying to decide whether to become a doctor, lawyer or a cultural practitioner, and I saw us there – like the same way I saw Hanif Kureishi there when I was a kid – that could inspire the feeling there’s a chance she could participate and talk about strange things that aren’t necessarily white things, or obvious parts of Western history.”

“For us, the alien is a confrontation of the unthought and the unknown,” Kodwo explains. Faced with the atmospheric change and disabused of any centre of gravity, the observer has to reassess where they are in relation to the world that’s here – a form of critical soul-searching that suits the Otolith Group down to the ground. “We do attract a lot of students because I think they like the attention it generates and the kinds of close readings we want. It’s part of what some people are calling ‘the discursive turn’ – work that takes place around arguments and participation.”

The idea of inner-world changes preventing someone from ‘going home’ – or the transformation of familiar landscapes into alien terrain – set against a backdrop of neo-colonial warfare, climate collapse and an eerily resonant trajectory of outward travel, is such a perfect metaphor for our current present, it’s almost embarrassing to have to say so. In an interconnected age, Anjali sees the need to turn that appraisal into images and art and let the resonance of ideas take the discourse up a few notches. “Chris Marker says that you can read a poem over and over again and it will inspire multiple meanings over time, because those meanings constantly change. For me, the films activate the viewer and generate all sorts of possibilities. I think it’s an emancipatory project.”

The 2010 Turner Prize exhibition featuring nominees The Otolith Group, Dexter Dalwood, Angela de la Cruz and Susan Phillipz opens October 5th at Tate Britain.

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