

THE INCOMPLETE CONDITION

NOMINATED FOR THE TATE'S TURNER PRIZE, THE OTOLITH GROUP
DISCUSS THEIR VISION OF THE 22ND CENTURY.

BY SHANAY JHAVERI



The Otolith Group was founded in 2000 by its core members, cultural theoretician Kodwo Eshun and artist Anjalika Sagar, both of whom live and work in London. Named after the small part of the inner ear that helps people maintain their sense of balance, the Otolith Group create work incorporating sound, text and moving images, and curate exhibitions that consider the history and future of the moving image. During the past seven years they have worked on a trilogy of film essays, *Otolith I* (2003), *Otolith II* (2007) and *Otolith III* (2009), each set at various points in the future.

The group's films and installations have been shown at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2006); the third Tate Triennial, London (2006); the Lisson Gallery, London (2007); documenta XII, Kassel (2007); and they have been nominated for the 2010 Turner Prize. In August, *ArtAsiaPacific* spoke to them about the film essay format, extraterrestrials and the influence of Chris Marker's films.

Otolith I (2003) is set in 2103, when the human race is no longer able to survive on Earth and must live on an international space station. Presented as a montage of archival footage and fictional voiceover, the work follows Dr. Usha Adebaran Sagar, the future descendent of Anjalika Sagar, and her research into life on Earth and past generations of her family. What led you to set the film so far in the future?

KE: We completed *Otolith I* in 2003, when the United States, Britain and the rest of the "Coalition of the Willing" embarked on the invasion and occupation of Iraq. The failure of the antiwar demonstrations and the political depression that we felt as a result informed our decision to set the film in the future. It offered a way to both engage with the present and to remove ourselves from the present. The film allowed us to take refuge in a hypothetical future from which it became possible to return to a present that no longer existed.

Why did you choose the film essay as a way to convey these concerns in the trilogy?

KE: The film essay is a way of constructing relations between archival, contemporary and fictional moments that do not necessarily relate. It's similar to a constellation. Our films often resemble a series of multiple moments that are arranged in order to resonate with each other in a language of association and pattern.

AS: Our concern is to build a relationship with events that affect us and to try to understand what this affect is. Why are we invested in events that we did not live through ourselves? The essayistic film questions the traditions of documentary that we continue to learn from and remain critical but respectful of.

Throughout the trilogy you weave in certain political movements and struggles. For example, in Otolith II we witness delegations of Indian feminists visiting local women's groups, museums, hospitals and factories, and attending conferences in China, Japan, Russia and Yugoslavia. What is your relation to these moments?

KE: We think about the afterlife of political movements. We often enter into these struggles after the fact, having received them in the wrong order. Our films deal with the difficulty of narrating one's relation to specific struggles.

AS: We work within a void of knowledge when it comes to

OTOLITH II, 2007,
film, 48 min. Courtesy
the artists.

particular details of histories of countermodernisms or competing modernisms in India, West Africa, North Africa and South America. The West revels in its ability to maintain its power, and it has done so in the way it articulates its histories. The film essay allows us to think about the writing of public histories in a private mode. We are fascinated by what Fredrick Jameson calls the “archaeologies of the future.” For us, many political movements are incomplete; they can be understood as a past that persists into the present, a past that insists on its presence.



OTOLITH III, 2009,
film, 45 min. Courtesy
the artists.

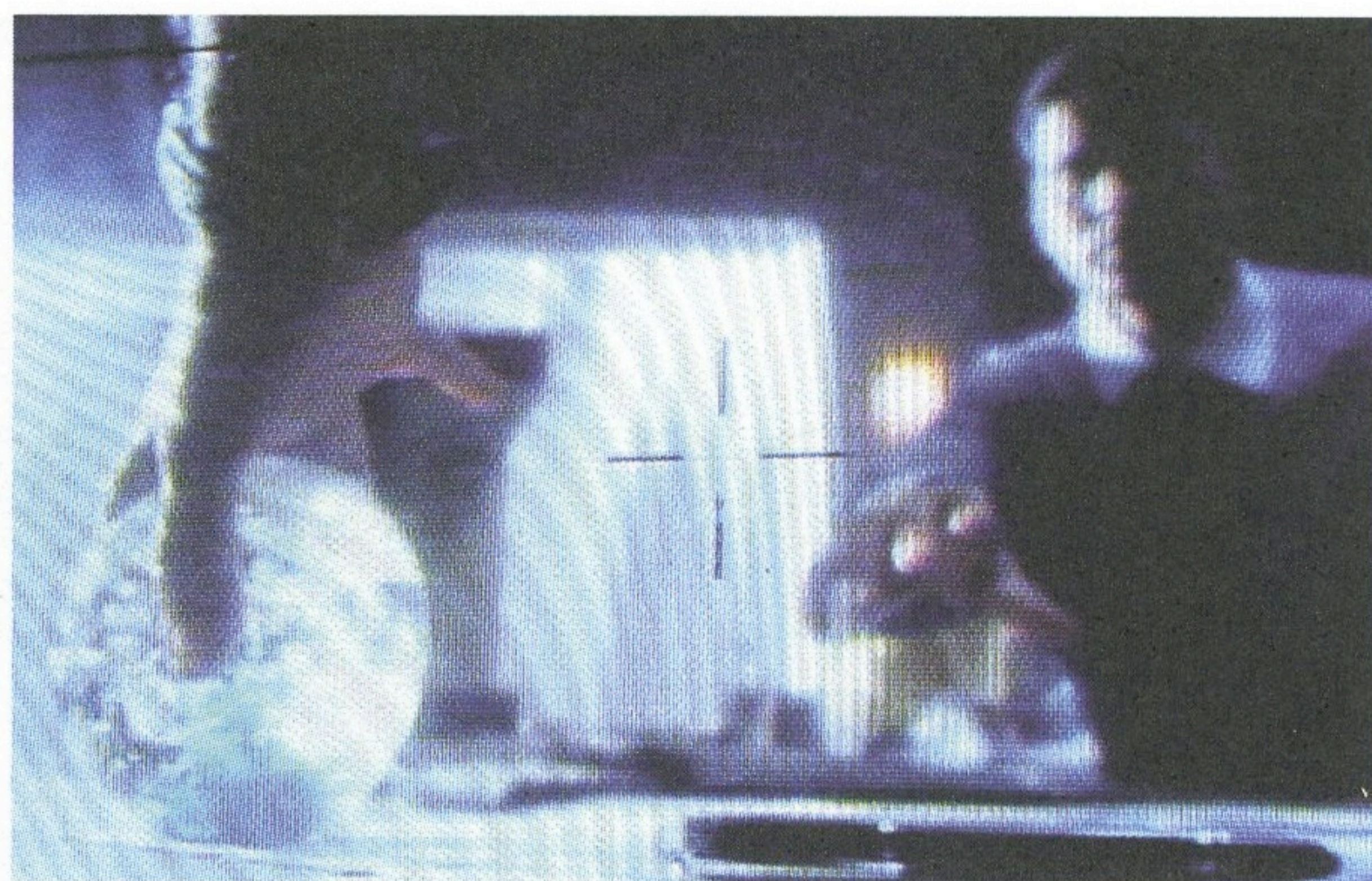
This persistence of the past connects to an idea of the “incomplete,” which you examine in Otolith III. You reference Satyajit Ray’s unmade science-fiction film, The Alien (1967), about a friendly extraterrestrial visiting a rural Bengal village, and Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini’s short documentary film Appunti per un Film sull’India (“Notes for a Film on India”) (1968), consisting of interviews with various people about the challenges of their country’s modernization.

KE: We realized that the idea of the “incomplete” was more complex than the idea of trying to fully realize Ray’s screenplay for *The Alien*. The challenge was to insist on what the art critic TJ Demos terms its “definitively indefinite form.”

OTOLITH I, 2003,
film, 22 min 30 sec.
Courtesy the artists.

I was struck by how the film raises the question of embodiment and disembodiment, and how your exploration of these concerns alludes to a larger sense of alienation.

KE: We commissioned several drawings of aliens. There are scenes where you see Anjali’s father Vidya Sagar drawing his version of an alien, which is entirely abstracted. We liked that idea of abstraction projecting an idea of alienation. It is in this context that Nasreen Mohamedi’s drawings find their way into the film. Mohamedi developed a rigorous aesthetic of reduction and human estrangement that we find compelling. *Otolith III* plays with several approaches to the idea of the encounter with the alien; it asks what possible form a morphology, a geography or a meteorology of that encounter might take.



AS: The alien in its cultural manifestations seems to be understood as a projection of contemporary fears rather than as a confrontation with the limits of the human. The alien is an ontological question as much as a question of difference or similarity. Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* (1979) is the film that helped us to understand the implications of this encounter with the “unthought.”

Could you discuss your relation to Chris Marker and Black Audio Film Collective?

KE: Many artists are inspired by Chris Marker’s work as it offers a sustained inquiry into the poetics and politics of the film form. From a British perspective, Black Audio Film Collective were Marker’s most important disciples during the 1980s and 1990s. Their films reworked Marker’s preoccupation with subjectivity, intimacy and interiority in order to investigate the crisis of Englishness as it emerged within the political context of the postwar era. Our work is deeply informed by their practice, but we operate within a very different historical conjuncture.

AS: We are situated much more precisely within an art-world context, whereas Black Audio Film Collective moved between the worlds of film festivals, broadcast television and publicly funded galleries. Television is closed off to us, and film festivals are only just beginning to open up to our work. It is in the art world that we are able to carry out certain experiments with form.

