STEPHANIE ROSENTHAL IN CONVERSATION WITH DAYANITA SINGH

SR: **Stephanie Rosenthal**
DS: **Dayanita Singh**

I'm sitting in Dayanita's house in Goa, in the courtyard, waiting for her to arrive so that we can begin the interview. Dayanita will bring her Museum works to London for the first time in 2013 and I'm curious to hear more about how the whole idea developed. Spending time in her house by myself is a bit like wandering through her mind; the Museums seem to have roots here in this very place, because of how one moves – navigating through the space directed by wooden structures – and how the door and window shutters fold and unfold. Clearly, the Museums also have origins in her earlier work and bring together many key aspects of her thinking. We have decided to give ourselves three consecutive days for the interview – starting here in Goa and ending in Bombay, where Dayanita wants to attend Zakir Hussain's concert. Each day I want to focus on a different subject: the roots of the Museum structures and their sculptural and physical components; Dayanita's approach to photography; and finally the editing process.

SR: Perhaps we could talk a bit about where your thought is right now about your *Museums*, but going back as far as to what you call your 'Kitchen Museum'. When I walked into your kitchen, I found a shelf with lots of small Moleskines on it, and you pulled them out and explained to me that these were how you brought into a certain kind of order the photographs you took during your travels with certain people. So, could you explain a bit how you started this kind of collecting? What was your desire in making these little books and how you came to call them your Kitchen Museum?

DS: You know, I'm not really a 'family' or 'domestic' kind of person. Those are not the priorities in my life. I want to just make books, and make work, and think about my work all the time. So it's a sort of joke to have all gadgets in the kitchen for cooking because I didn't really use it for cooking at that time. I wanted to let the mind go, and I find that domesticity and family and those rituals really get in the way. The little books started because I used to do these amazing travels with friends – certain friends with great minds; some of them not even friends, just great minds. And we would go to places, and often we would go to houses of famous people that have been turned into house museums after their death, because it was the interest of the friend I was travelling with, or my interest, or my friend was researching a political figure. So, that was how we ended up going to a particular museum, like Anand Bhavan in Allahabad, which was Nehru's house. The person I was travelling with was doing research in Nehru's house, and I was able to walk around and make photos. It was fascinating to think that the first prime minister of India had slept here and this was the door that connected him to his daughter, who then went on to become another prime minister, and the Eagle flask that sat by his table. These were all museums before the time of curators. They would just have a keeper, someone who would make sure everything remains as they used to be.

SR: Yes, 'keeper' is such a nice word.

DS: Yes. I want all my museums finally to have trustees and keepers. I haven't got to that as yet. Anyway, the travels would often entail going to house museums with these great minds and I wouldn't know how to respond to them after the travel. Then, when I came back, I would have these wonderful contact sheets of just 12 images on a slightly larger than A4 size paper because I use a Hasselblad and medium-format film. The contact sheets were really like the diary of the time I had spent with the friends. But they were all such amazing people that I couldn't quite write a letter to them. So, I thought if I make books out of our travels, they might put them in their pockets and take them on their travels, and each accordion-fold Moleskine could, in turn, open out into an exhibition. If I sent a friend a book I had made about our travel to Budapest, when he went to Boston he might display it in his hotel room. Once, there was also the idea that they would get visa stamps at immigration, but of course that wasn't possible! I love that sound of stamping because it's so much a part of my life. As I started to make these books for various friends, Liz Joby said to me, You know, you must keep a copy for yourself. With another friend, we had the idea that we could sometimes have a guerrilla exhibition. So this could be my parallel story. So, there could be the art gallery and the formal publisher, but suppose I decided in Salegaon that I wanted to have an exhibition, or I went to Munich and suddenly wanted to have an exhibition, I could write to all the 32 people that had these booklets from me and ask them to send the books back for the exhibition. So, in a week we could have an exhibition, and because they are all accordion-fold they become exhibitions in themselves. So, I showed one such book to Gerhard Steidl because he came to Calcutta with Günter Grass and I had made a book for him with photographs from that trip. I remember this was at the Frith Street Gallery. I had an exhibition going on downstairs, and upstairs, in the apartment where I was staying, I had my parallel show that I would take very few people to see. I had these moleskins opened out on the mantelpiece, on the windowsill, everywhere. That was my secret show. Secrets are very important to me and that's another reason why I think I like museums because they're full of secrets and clues…

SR: House museums especially.

DS: I invited Steidl to come upstairs. I wanted to give him a book, but somehow the book either has to go casually in the post or I like to improvise a ceremony around the giving of it. So I had to call him to the apartment, show him all the others and then present the book to him, *his* book, the one I had made for him. And he asked me, How many do you have? I said, I have 32. And he said, we must publish these. No Gerhard, I can't, I said, this is like private letters to people. Nobody else is going to understand why I have these tiger lilies in the photo. But you will know because they poked me in the eye during our conversation. The photos are very specific, and that brings me to the addressee, who is also very important. So if I have to start making a list of the things that are really important to me, it would have secrets and the addressee. I had picked seven books, including one that I had made for my mother of her pictures, and went to Steidl and printed them. We were going to call it, I can't remember, *Museum Story*. They were called *Sent A Letter* at the end.

SR: If it was *Museum Stories*, that would be really interesting, no?

DS: I had already been calling the little books my Kitchen Museum because they were all parked in my kitchen. There was a big conference happening on museums in Delhi with all the academics, and I said I would bring my museums along. I said, it's so simple, you hire long tables from the caterers, cover them with white sheets, and I'll set up my museums on them.

SR: So the idea of a portable museum was already there?

DS: Absolutely. That's why they are little books. I knew that one day I would make my own museums, and even when I got this house in Goa I knew that some day this will become a museum. That's why I've left a lot of the fittings even if they don't work because I thought architecturally they would be so important. It could become an architecture museum or it could become a furniture museum.

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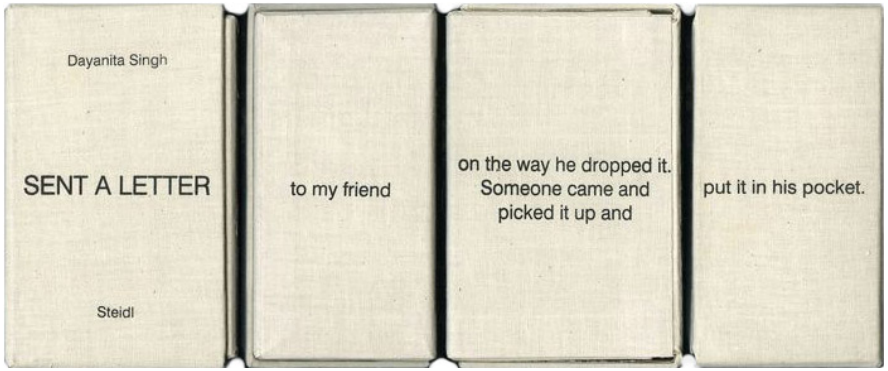

DS : Do you know that the box in which the seven volumes of *Sent A Letter* are kept was made in India?

SR: No, I didn't know that.

DS: I designed the box. In a way, you could say that that was my first structure.

SR: That's what I think.

DS: Because I didn't want it to be just a lid, like that of a toffee box or a cookie box. It's actually so similar to what I'm making now – a giant *Sent a Letter*. I was saying to you that the bed should fit over the *Museum of Chance*. That's the same thing because I have a box and I have this on top, this opens, and you have your books here.

SR: Inside, you have nearly seven mini-structures.

DS: Absolutely. And now I have seven museums. So this box was made in India and 3,000 empty boxes were shipped from India to Steidl in Germany. Both of us knew that we could make this into a fantastic limited edition and price it as low as we can. Nothing like this had existed before. So it was, dare one say, a new form.

SR: Is the *Kitchen Museum* still growing?

DS: No, I think the *Kitchen Museum* sort of stopped, and these larger structures started to emerge and now I'm not sure I'll go back to the Moleskines.

SR: So the book feeds the museum structures in a very important way?

DS: Yes.

SR: So how would you see then the development of the book cart? The first book cart that you did was for *House of Love*, right?

DS: Yes. The thought actually started during the *Indian Highway* show at the Serpentine Gallery in 2009, for which I had a design for a structure. But, at that time, I didn't have the courage to follow it through. It was a trolley with lots of little drawers that pulled out on different sides.

SR: Was that for photographs or books?

DS: For photographs. The idea was that I would move this trolley through the exhibition and it would be parked in different places and I would come and decide which drawers need to be opened together.

SR: So you were always driven by this idea of showing your photographs differently from framing them on the wall?

DS: You know this is where context comes in, and I'm scared to even mention it because then that becomes another category. But, in India, the relationship with the image is very different from anywhere else in the world. If you go to the Indian Museum in Calcutta, which is the most beautiful museum with incredible vitrines, and I never tire of going there, you will see that outside the museum, on the footpath, are being sold posters of the Swiss Alps, of Kashmir, of film stars and cute babies. And I thought, if there's any merit to what I do, then my images should be selling on the footpath. That became my sort of dream, that you could buy a poster of my image on the path in front of the museum in Calcutta, where gods and babies and film stars are sold together. So, someone who is interested will look at the *Museum of Photography* and understand that there is a different approach to the image there. Then, in 2008, I was in Calcutta for my *Ladies of Calcutta* exhibition, and I was walking on Park Street with *Sent a Letter* in my hand because I was going to display it in the gallery. I walked past this jewellery store and the vitrines were empty, beautiful vitrines of dark wood. For me it has to be dark wood. It has to be a certain kind of wood. So when everybody kindly offers to make my structures in London, Germany, Venice or Japan, I can't. It's a certain wood, a certain oil finish, and certain accidents. Yes, accident. That would be another key word for me – the accident. Being open to the accident and always ready for the accident. And Mona is a good example of that. Anyway, I'll come to that later. So I'm walking on Park Street, see these empty vitrines, I go into the jewellery shop, meet the owner and say, If you give me your vitrines I could put my little books there. And he says, Sure, our jewellery is too expensive to put out there. I'm with my friend, Adam Fuss. He's standing on the street, a really busy street, like Oxford Street. I'm inside the little area placing my books, and Adam is telling me how to place them. That was 2008, January. The books are still there in 2013. Which museum in the world can give that kind of footfall?

SR: Yes. A permanent exhibition.

DS: I do feel that the book is at the heart of my work. To me the exhibition is the catalogue of the works in the book. The problem with the book is that it is mass-produced. So, I have this category of mass-produced artist's books. I don't think an artist has to be unique. I think a mass-produced book can also be an artist's book, and Gerhard makes mass-produced artists' books.

SR: So, the book is your way to be on the footpath and out, and allow a lot of people to see your work instead of saying that it's just for a few people here to buy.

DS: The book-cart was also a way to make my work accessible to people. I said, okay, I'm going to sell the books myself and I want people to understand that this is at the heart of my work. So when I have museum

groups coming to my studio, the entry fee to my studio is to buy a book. That's why I have that bookshelf with my books outside my house. It's very important for me that people buy the book. With *House of Love*, I was already selling my books myself. I would do book tours, like my writer friends, go to Bangalore and Calcutta. My airfare would cost me more than all these books together, but I think with *House of Love* I succeeded because I sold 400 books in six weeks. I took the cart through the art fair in Delhi and more people bought because I was there with the work, saying "Buy the work!" I made special bags for it.

SR: And the cake? Were you giving people cake?

DS: Yes, with my book-cover on it. My doctor friend had come, and it wasn't just anybody that could give the cake, it had to be someone I had appointed.

SR: The keeper?

DS: Yes, the cake-keeper. Another friend helped me roll the cart out, and I had sent a message to my friends to say I'm doing something special. So, they were all there and so people bought the book. I had money coming out of my pockets. It was all cash. And that was more satisfying than any print sales.

SR: It's always variations on being able to bring something somewhere easily, to have a personal approach to something, to open it up.

DS: Also that I can do it myself. I was so disappointed that I couldn't carry my cart in my suitcase to Venice, and I'm still determined to make a cart that I can carry in three suitcases.

SR: So all these ideas seem to culminate in the museum structures.

DS: Absolutely, which is why I said to you, that if you want to call this a retrospective, you call it a retrospective, but for me it's my first show. It's the beginning for me. I didn't say that about any show before because it was always a progression with this leading to that. But this is, in a way, my first show, so you're the fool for calling it a retrospective, and I'm going to have the last laugh because it's actually a new beginning.

SR: Could you describe a bit what they are, how they look, coming from *Sent a Letter*, the Moleskines and the carts?

DS: I think they are like giant books. They are a kind of photo-architecture, if I could dare to say that. I would hesitate to use the word, 'sculpture'. But they are certainly three-dimensional forms that *you* have to come to and engage with. What is key to making them my museums is that they have storage in them with the possibility of changing them. Every month or every week you can invite someone to re-edit, say, the *Museum of Chance*. The *Furniture Museum* finally might have 80 images, but we can only display 40 images at one time, so 40 are in storage. You can decide that you want to display what is going on, say, in the photos of the beds, so for a week you put the bed pictures out. The museum keeps changing in the images that it shows you, but you always know there's more, and that's the secret aspect. I don't like it when you take those images out and put them on the wall, which is why I've made those little structures inside the museum. If you can't handle looking at so many images at a time, and you want to put something on the wall, then I've made these structures for you and I've also not put glass on any of those images because I really don't want you to put them flat on the wall. That was my whole point! It's heartbreaking. You put an exhibition together, you've spent two years working on something, and then it's a very passive way in which people come to look at the work on the wall. That's why I don't make large prints: then you don't even have to enter the space, you can just do a 360 degree, get the show, and leave. If you don't have the time to engage with me then I have nothing to offer you either. I think the book handles this the best because you take the book home and you see it in my sequence. Now I think it's a little bit about curating as well. Not so much now, but earlier, I was not at all comfortable with the way my work would be curated, and the context it would be put into, because it's photography. So, it can be used as illustration for your ideas of what you think upper-class Indian life should be or whatever. And I don't want to give you that. That's not why I photograph, and if I wanted to do that I would do it myself. I don't need a curator to come and tell me the context of my work. For a long time, the book was the only place where I could have the sequence as I saw it. Now it's a different matter. We're in a very different place now, but ten years ago it wasn't like that. I resented that because, for me, the work is not about making photographs, it's about the editing and the sequencing, and when somebody else does that for me you take the reason why I make my work away.

SR: So the museums allow you not only to edit the sequence, but also to make constant changes if and when you want to.

DS: Absolutely. Depending on the curator, and if I feel we've been able to get to a certain point in our conversation, they can also change it. But it's not open to the public to change and it's designed like that. That's why it doesn't have glass. The frames are designed so that they sit nicely in your hands, so you are holding the image as photography was meant to be seen in the analogue days. Now it's the iPad.

SR: That you have the storage is also crucial. The whole of *File Room* is about storage – the archive.

DS: These structures would not have emerged in the same way if I hadn't had these two or three years of obsession with archives. In India, there's no IKEA, so there's no one format for the archives. Every archivist

would design their own structures, whether it is metal or wood, and most times also design their own cataloguing systems. So, there is great individuality there, and I love that individuality, that each person thought about how the structure will work for them and I think I've learnt a lot from those archivists.

SR: That's why it's so important for you to produce the museums in India because that's exactly what you are doing – coming up with your own form and system.

DS: My own form. Now, because of our conversation about the *Museum of Chance*, and how it might become a courtyard or room, let's say it becomes a room. What do we do with the outside of it? I actually just went round and round the structure trying to work that out.

SR: That's why your museums don't work in the way that you do the drawings and then anybody can make them from the drawings. It's much more like a developing process, really like sculpting something, together with your carpenters.

DS: This is something that is going to be in a Memorandum of Understanding that I am making to give my curators – this organic way of working, which is, I think, difficult to explain to some parts of the world. Things evolve, things change, they must, and thank god that they do. So don't try and box me in, I can't bear that.

SR: You get out of certain boxes because you're creating your own museums. You are the one who is saying what's happening there.

DS: I'm not so stupid as to call a museum the *Furniture Museum*, and to leave it at furniture. If I call a museum the *Museum of Photography*, it's a simple title because I want to fool you. I want to play with you, I want to be mischievous. Then, when you look at it, hopefully it will change the way you do the next photography show, especially when it's about India.

SR: Is it important that we also talk about the form of the contact sheet in relation to the museum?

DS: I have a library of my contact sheets with boxes that were specially made for them and fabric that was specially dyed in the colour that I wanted, so I could just go into my contact sheets at any time and look at

these books, for they are unending archives. I do *File Room* and think I have exhausted those contact sheets, there is nothing more in them. Then I start to work on the *Furniture Museum* and say, oh my god, there are all those desks. Or I start looking at the contact sheets while doing *Blue Book*, but five or six years later, I return to the same contact sheets and find all the machines.

SR: That's why editing is so important for you, I guess, because you re-edit your own work constantly.

DS: Yes, but you also keep finding new things on a contact sheet that, somehow, when I put on my *Furniture* glasses, I'm looking at in a certain way, but then when I think of *Embraces*, I find that there are furniture that

are embracing. It's just that what spectacles I put on to look at the contact sheets determine the different things I find in them.

SR: I think that's what the museums bring together for the first time, because you didn't have that in the book. You had it in the *House of Love* cart, but I think the structures make you look at your own work in the form of contact sheets, and the fact that they are portable and changeable. So, the museums bring all these different levels of your work together at the moment. But what is the future of the museums when they come back to your house?

DS: Every full moon they will be open to the public. I'm waiting anxiously for the museums to come back because all the furniture will go out then. I'll have a big sale. And all the museums will be placed against the wall.

SR: All the furniture from…?

DS: From downstairs, from the sitting room. Just like right now we have the *House of Love* structure parked in the middle. That's pretty much how it will be. Different *Museums* around the walls that are just there. They might even have slip-covers, as you have for furniture. So, you can't see them all at the same time. Maybe, maybe not. I have to think about that. And then one *Museum* would be opened up. So say, *House of Love*. You can come, look at it, sit down, you could read something around it because the idea is also that it would have ongoing catalogues. So, someone could be the editor, and if he feels that you could write something he could request you to do so. We could commission texts for each museum, and the catalogues will build up over time. My bedroom could accommodate an archivist-in-residence. It could just as well be curator-in-residence. The archivist could be a curator, a writer, or an artist who lives there. The kitchen could become the office and reception area. The entire front section, the TV room as well as the living room, would all be this L-shaped museum space, but with the possibility of having dinners in there. Maybe the long table will remain, the benches could go underneath it. A reading space, and dinners. I would then move upstairs. In time, I might add other people's photos, or the museum could grow organically. Maybe there could be a baby museum fitted inside, say, the *Museum of Chance* that then becomes my suitcase when I go to Kyoto, or I may want to bring it to Goa. I hope the museums will keep growing. But everything could change as things must change, and I think the museums will allow me that.

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SR: Your work is very much like making a house, and now it seems that, with the museum structures, you're actually building these houses. It's a museum because there is storage, an archive, and you can look at the works. But it's also like making houses because you create spaces for people to look at and move in. You choreograph people through a space, and photography, for you, is also a kind of act, with a really physical impact.

DS: I imagine everybody is like that – you are all the time very aware of the space that you are in. If I go to a hotel room or someone's house, I immediately think of how I would rearrange the room, what the bed should be facing, what that does to how you get out of the bed, how you sit. I'm fascinated by chairs, by beds, and how we use spaces – hence, with architecture. I think of architecture as something that everybody must be interested in, and the home to me is the beginning of that architecture, that engagement with space inside a home. So, if you go to a really tiny home, whether it's in Japan or a so-called slum in Bombay, the maximum usage of space and the notion of privacy become very interesting. It's fascinating to see the ingenious ways in which people live in a little space. When I bought this house in Goa, my scale changed because I grew up in a very large house, but it was a large house where rooms were added on as and when they were required. My father was always breaking rooms and building rooms, and my mother's nightmare was coming home and finding that there was suddenly a wall in the middle of the bedroom because he had the idea to make a closet from the other side and all her things would be all over the place. So I grew up in a very organic house. When my grandfather was coming to stay we just built some glass walls and put a cover over the roof and made a roof, and that was it. When it wasn't needed anymore, it was broken down and then another floor was built on the roof, so that things kept changing. For me, the home and its architecture are not a fixed space, and it is about being able to change the space over time, over moods, over even with the changing of light. Then I

got the house in Goa, and once I removed the false ceiling here, the scale was incredible, and always, since that time in 2001 or 2002, I had the idea that, in this vast space, I wanted to have smaller spaces, almost like little

caves that I could go into. So, I tried to make these conversation corners. Everything was around conversations and beds, and I think you can have the best conversations when you're horizontal. As you've probably realised by now, conversations are key for me. It is *the* most important thing. So, the architecture has to allow for that, as well as allow for privacy. Yes, two things I would add to my list of keywords, after 'secrets' and 'accidents', are 'conversation' and 'privacy'. Now that I have this very large house, it's about how to create more intimate spaces within it. So, this house has a lot of four-poster beds, for instance. When I was a photo-journalist, and used to work in the brothels, I would notice how the curtains would be put around the bed, and that becomes the room for sex, and the child and all the bags are put under the bed. The bed is used in all kinds of ways, and you stand the bed up and it becomes a wall. Wherever I am, I'm constantly thinking about how spaces can be rearranged.

SR: This is exactly what you're doing with the museum structures.

DS: Absolutely.

SR: They allow you to rearrange the space but they also allow you to rearrange how you show your work.

DS: I'm tired of watching people come into exhibitions where the prints are on the wall, and taking it all in, especially if they are large prints, in one view. In three seconds, you can look at the whole show. I started to make *Go Away Closer* prints really small, so if you wanted to see them you had to come close. The books were small. But even that's not enough, and I felt I had to take the photography off the wall, but somehow I feel one of the problems is that the photo got stuck to the wall. I want to bring the photograph away from the wall. In the house we grew up in, the photographs were on every table surface, and my mother would put glass over them so that when we were eating there were photographs, the coffee table had photographs, the cupboard doors had photographs. There were photographs everywhere because she was a photographer, and she wanted to display her photographs, apart from making albums.

SR: If you look at the history of exhibitions, exhibition spaces very often are very neutral spaces. But you are breaking this now, and I think your photography is very personal photography, in the sense that you manage to make an image part of something like a piece of personal furniture.

DS: But isn't that the point? I don't know any other way. That's not even a question for me. I couldn't do it in any other way. I thrive on conversations, and, to me, a conversation has to be personal. I'm only

interested in the personal. Even if it's the most intellectual exercise, I'm interested in the personal aspect of it, and I don't see the separation between the personal and the intellectual. Similarly, I don't see why my work should be domestic. To me it's what it is. That *is* the way it is, but conversation has to be personal. The scale has to be something that I can deal with.

SR: A human scale.

DS: The structures have to be such that I can move them myself. In my house I'm pushing the structures all the time by myself. I'm changing the pictures myself. With my height, and now that I have added another floor to some of the structures, I'm designing the ladder chair, so that I don't have to wait for someone to come and help me change the picture on top, I might want to do that in the middle of the night.

SR: You always talk beautifully about how, with the museums, people can wander around and discover different aspects of them. If you walk around into the structure you're in a very intimate space.

DS: I think the work emerges over time and whenever I try to push it to something it doesn't work. It has to evolve on its own. It has to be an organic process. It has to keep changing and it has to allow for change. So, if there's a curator that wants me to fix an idea, then it becomes very difficult for us to work together because I'm going to keep changing even during the show, and now I'm making work that I can change. I don't think anyone should have a problem with that and if they do then there's nothing I can really do about it because the work thrives on that. Just as I thrive on conversation, the work thrives on the conversation with me. I make it, I put pictures into it, I walk around it, talk around it, have coffee in front of it, read in front of it. I have a picture on my phone of my two little friends from Ahmedabad who came and made their houses on either side of *File Museum* with cushions from my sofas, and the middle area became their table, their centre table, and I thought, that's an interesting concept for two beds. So I have to be free to have that conversation with the work.

SR: Your work has to change because the transformation is inherent in it. You're just used to it. You lived in a house for such a long time, spaces were changing all the time.

DS: All the time. To get to my room you had to walk through five other rooms.

SR: What the museum structures do is that they make it obvious that photography is really a tiny aspect of your work. Space is the most important thing and how people move in space. Most people are not aware of how much the spaces they inhabit have an impact on their whole life.

DS: I mean a house is all the views that it has, no?

SR: Yes.

DS: It's what you see and that's so important. So that's why I think it's very difficult for me to live in apartments. Light is so important and how you wake up is so important. So, I don't read the newspaper as a habit in the morning, I don't watch television in the morning, so that I can wake up and come out and see the frangipani and collect the flowers that have dropped, and just sort of lounge. Sometimes I come and I lie down here and have my second sleep. Second sleep is also very important because waking up is so important. That is that great time between being asleep and being awake. It's such an important time. So I can't have an alarm to wake up. I have to wake up when I do, and if I have an alarm, it's Rashid Khan singing.

SR: I always like to think about work as we think about a house, you keep adding spaces and rooms. Sometimes when you meet a new person, it is like adding something to your mind. Similarly, walking through a house is sometimes like walking through someone's mind. When I wander through your house, it's very much like walking through your mind, because lots of things that you are influenced by and refer to are in the house.

DS: This house is incredible because people tell me, Oh, I've seen this house before, I've seen it in your pictures. But I have never photographed it. So I found a house that looks like my photographs.

SR: That's what I thought yesterday when you said that the house was a very important influence. But I also think that your work was a very big influence on your finding the house.

DS: Yes. My work, and my partner at that time, sort of brought me to the house. But yes, I did an exhibition here in this village, and I called it *Demello Vado*. It was for the villagers, and they could take the pictures off the wall. So they are hanging in people's homes. They were these laminated prints, so the children came and put their ice-cream hands on them and that was okay, and it was a very different kind of exhibition. At that exhibition, somebody said to me, You've called your exhibition *Demello Vado*, you must now buy Dr Demello's house. I said, Don't be silly, I don't need a house. I don't need property. Property means litigation and I don't want anything. And then my boyfriend at that time said to me, Well, why don't you at least go and see the house, since you like to photograph old houses? I came to see it, went to the upstairs room and I just felt that this place was meant for me. I had to have it, and today my address is Demello Vado. That's the great accident. 'Vado' means area.

Difficult Loves

Dream Villa productions

The Idea of India

Dream Villa productions

And Demello is a name. So I just made the name up. The owner of this house was a man called Dr Demello, doctor to the Sultan of Zanzibar and conductor of the Salegaon Symphony Orchestra. This was a dance house. People would come here and have parties in the front rooms. And it was a bachelor's house. So the house sort of found me, and I lost the boyfriend. You know, I'm very grateful, not just for the effect of the house of my work, but also for the luck of having met him. He brought incredible gifts to my life, and he brought incredible pain in my life. He opened amazing windows: a Calvino window, a Mahler window, and an Ondaatje window. And actually by an incredible chance, or fate, or not by fate, but through an accident more absurd than I can explain, even a Geoff Dyer window. So, all these windows, but also pain, and loss. In a way, love is the accident that brought so many other things into my life, including this house. Then,

many years later, after I had made *House of Love*, I had come to Goa and I was going to meet the ex on New Year's Day. He has a wonderful wife, and I thought it would be great to go with this bottle of vintage champagne in a beautiful box. I had these same square prints as I have now, with adhesive behind them, and since he sort of led me to the *File Room* work, I took the pictures of the file-keepers and pasted them on the box, like a structure, on all four sides. I received so much from him that I can't just take him a bottle of champagne, even when it's this beautiful old bottle. So I pasted the photos on the box and took the bottle to him, and he told me that it would make an incredible cart. But I forgot about it afterwards.

SR: So, now we have the tower that we could call the "Champagne Bottle"!

DS: But it's interesting that I had forgotten about that connection.

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SR: I remember, last time you said that photography is just 10 percent of you. So, I think you would have to describe yourself as photographer, bookmaker, sculptor, architect. I mean you could put lots of different things to it.

DS: Exactly. I must say that I get a slight twinge when I read, "Dayanita Singh, photographer", because of course I photograph, but so do you and so does everyone in this village.

SR: Yes, but I think that's something totally different.

DS: The photograph is my raw material. If I make photographs it's to make books. If I say that in September I want to go and make photographs it's because I want to make more museums. I'm not photographing just to make photographs. I think that is the big difference. To collect raw material, I can't just say I'm going off to Calcutta now. There's a whole process involved in setting out, so my research is reading, and it's reading from that inspiration bookshelf that I showed you in Delhi. It's listening to certain pieces of music. Only then can I go out and photograph.

SR: There are again these two ways of looking at it: you can say you're not a photographer or we can change our idea of what a photographer is.

DS: I think that's going to happen anyway. I think we're just doing the show at a time when people have not really come to terms with this huge shift that's happening in photography and photography has really become like language. Just as writing down words doesn't make you a writer, making photographs doesn't make you a photographer. That's why I say photo-architecture. Why is it so difficult for people to accept that I make photo-architecture? Of course. I *love* photography. I mean that is my medium, I've been making photographs for 30 years. It's just what one does. It's like breathing. Obviously, if I'm photographing, say, plants there'll be something more to that picture than just what is in front of the camera. But that's all my life experience and all the books I've read and all the music I've listened to and maybe that's all that there is to it – that you can bring that whole experience to what you do. So if there's a difference in my photography it might be just that. But now that I can make all these photographs, it's not enough. I don't want to keep making family portraits all my life or pictures of chairs or any of those things. At that time, it was important to do it like that, but now I want to move on. And I can't let categories hold me back.

SR: I think it's a very important function of artists to break categories. You can go back hundreds of years and will realise that most of the discussions one had with an artist were about his saying, I'm not a painter or I'm not a photographer or I'm not a sculptor. That's about breaking down certain structures of thinking and allowing, as you said, your river to flow in a different direction. So, I like the invention of terms like photo-architecture, even if you might not talk about that anymore for 10 years. It's still interesting to make clear that you want to change the idea of what photography is.

DS: It's important for people to have something that they understand. On the other hand, the same words could pull me back. I'm trying to change, the river is flowing this way, and I'm trying to take it that way, and then you're pulling me back with the words that you put around me. If one is trying to chart one's own course because one has to, there is a tremendous strain put by the institutions, the curators and the writers, who want to pull you back because they have their own vocabularies around

what they do. They want you to fit in to that, and it hurts my back. It creates a back problem for me when they want to box me in. We're putting out a new object, and I know that conversations get so fixed by the words that are put out around the object. So, if one has the flexibility to address it at that point, it makes a very big difference. It's like whether we call it a structure or a museum or photo-architecture. That sets the tone, no?

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DS: The main thing with the photography is I take photographs to be able to make books, to make something else. I'm not a photographer in the sense that I just make photographs. The photographs from the beginning, from the time I started working with Zakir, were taken to do something with them. So I made the record cover of Zakir. I did all kinds of other graphic-design exercises with pictures of Zakir, and finally made the book about Zakir while I was a student. So photography and the book go hand in hand for me. That's how I started, but then I entered an art world or a photo world that told me, No, these are separate things. But I still made *Myself Mona Ahmed* very much like the way I made the Zakir book. But after *Mona*, when I entered the larger art-world, I had to push my books aside. I don't need to do that because now I know that that was always, always the heart of my work. I was never making random photographs, never just making photographs for the sake of making photographs. It was always to become something more. What kind of book it would be is a different matter.

SR: So, what is the interest of yours in the book, and the relationship between the book and photography?

DS: The form of the book is a very intimate form. To me, it's the best way to look at photography. I would rather give up on print quality, but I cannot bear the glass that comes between the print and me. So I love the book, I love that you can handle it, and love the fact that I've been able to finally find a way that the book can really be on the wall as well. So when I can have a book doing so many different things, I don't need to make these single prints, and now with the structures, I've made what might be called a giant book, but I am unwilling to fix it at that. We will see what terminology we come up with for these sculptures or structures, but they are also very much part of the book thinking. So if you have a mother who's an obsessive album-maker and always putting photos in every possibly surface she could find in the home, you don't have this idea that other people have of photography being just made up of photographs. It's never been that for me. As I keep saying, the photo is just the raw material.

SR: In the book, you can arrange a certain sequence.

DS: The sequence is very important to me; the pacing is very important to me; the text that goes into it is very important to me. Whether there is any text or not, every little detail in the book is very important to me, and I was just very fortunate to meet Gerhard Steidl, who can appreciate exactly that. It wasn't that different from my Zakir

book though, which I designed myself, I typeset myself, and everything else I did myself.

SR: Already with the Zakir book, you would say that you use the photos like a writer would use words.

DS: Yes, it's just I didn't have the courage at that time to say, This is what I want to do and this is how I will make it work. So I went into photo-journalism. I went into the art system of prints on a wall in matt editions. But where am I now? I'm back to where I started. I had to go through that process, and I had to carry other people with me in that process, so that ten years ago I would not have been able to have this conversation with you because I was not confident about it.

SR: Also, it seems like you've found a new form. With *File Room*, you've found a new form of book, and because the book has an image on the cover, and you made a little structure into which the book fits, you've found a way of allowing people to hang the book as a work on the wall and still have an image to look at.

DS: With *File Room*, yes, I've been able to make a form, find a form. It's also about having the conviction to say, this is it. I'm not doing anything that different from the Zakir book. There is another thing that I'm trying to make a shift in: I can change my work all the time. I can make *Dream Villa* posters and sell it in the bookshop if I want. It's my work. What is this sort of rule in the art world that you make an artwork and that's it? This is what the art world has taught me, or has told me, and I don't agree with that. Like fungus or like mushrooms, the work can keep growing or changing. My structures allow me that. But generally, it's like, This is how you made *Dream Villa*, this is how we always have to show it. This is the size, this is the matt, this is the frame. We can't change it. I love my photographs being used as book covers, for instance. Some day, I hope to make a book of imaginary book covers, so maybe a whole room in the next show could just become book covers. So I want my images back. I don't want anybody to tell me what I can and cannot do with my images, and if the art-world is so rigid then I'm quite happy to not be part of it, and run a bookshop with my own book-covers. But, if I make all my work of book-covers, or if I decide to make furniture, don't misunderstand this as my modesty. I'm not modest at all. I know that those book-covers will make a fantastic archive, but there's bound to be some institution in the world that would love to show all my book-covers made from all my work. If I make furniture, it doesn't mean that I'm not relevant any more. I have this way of calling something the *Museum of Furniture*. But I don't really mean it like that. I'm much more convoluted than the *Museum of Little Ladies* or *Museum of Photography*. So, when I say that I'm not going to do this or I'm not so interested in that, it's because I can say okay, if it doesn't work for you, no problem, I have to do it anyway. I can't stop myself. That's the difference. So, for five years nobody wants to show me, no problem; for twenty years, no problem. I can always find ways of putting my work out there. I have store windows in Calcutta showing my work. I can go to the footpath outside the Indian Museum. There are so many different ways. That's perhaps one of the greatest advantages of photography. If I'm a sculptor or a painter, I have to put my work out for people to see. But I could have a magazine that I bring out once a year if it was just the photography I wanted to put out. There are so many ways to work. Photography is my raw material. It's what I work with.

SR: So you say that photography is more like paint. It's not painting. It's more like paint or words.

DS: Hmmm, a good one! Actually, the paint analogy is even better than the words. So, I have found very good quality paint…

SR: What do you make out of it?

DS: Exactly, I can make a paint store, no? But I don't want a paint store. How am I going to put something more into it? I have to put myself into it.

SR: So you're saying making a photograph is more like finding the paint, but that doesn't make a good painting.

DS: And I know where to find the good paint. I know which place. I know how to make the good paint. I don't even need to buy the ready-made. I know how to make it.

SR: It's very interesting that you're not protective. Everybody else would say, Well, it's not so easy to make a good photograph. But you're

saying, Look at the photographs people are making, it is not that difficult to make a good photograph.

DS: Perhaps somebody else may not be able to make good photographs consistently, but that's hardly anything to write home about. It may be fine for everybody else. Let people do what they want. But it's not enough for me.

SR: To think like that gives you a lot of freedom. Otherwise, you would be in constant in fear of everybody else making good photographs on an iPhone, or you feel, Oh my God, what am I doing? There are lots of other people doing it.

DS: Yes, the art world is wonderful and institutions are great and museums are fantastic. Who would not want to be there? But if no museum is interested in my work, I still have the jewellery store in Calcutta. I still have my own structures. I will always be able to find some museum that will be happy to have my structures; if not a museum, I can always give them to a library. I want everything to be archival. I want them to have a home. I'm thinking, Where can I park these museums when I'm not there?

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DS: When I photographed the girl on the bed in *Go Away Closer*, I recognised a feeling, an emotion that I had photographed with before. It was like a flash. It's from that time on that my work shifted so drastically. But it wasn't with the prints. It was the book. The prints were just the extension of the book.

SR: So, the book is the starting point for *Go Away Closer*?

DS: Yes, absolutely. I took one picture, recognised it as *Go Away Closer*, and flew back to Delhi because I couldn't stop myself. I knew I had done this many times before. I recognised the *déjà vu* – it gives you a slightly sick feeling. I'd been here before. That's when *Go Away Closer* came into my mind. I looked in my contact sheets and found the images, one after the other.

SR: This is exactly what you're doing now with the museums. You see one thing, you feel it's in your work and then you go…

DS: Yes, excavate in my own archive. I find it and I put it together. Each one of those museums could make a beautiful book, but I don't want to do that right now because I want the structure to be the form.

SR: So, you edited your work now as you would edit a book. The editing for the museum structures is like you would edit a sequence. The interesting aspect of the museum structures or the photo-architecture is not so much that you make sequences in them as that you open them up a lot and you kind of share…

DS: Yes, I share, but it's a controlled sharing. I give you images that should be able to work in any combination. But I'm not allowing you to

say, I want a Saroj Khan here, and a sex worker there, and so on. You can't do that. The idea is that I will not always be there to install. The idea of the museums is that they will go on tour.

SR: It feels like you give someone a contact sheet and you say, if you look form left to right, if you go across or if you go down, that's your thing.

DS: Yes, and I can keep changing it. If I lived in London, I would come every week and change them. If I come back during the show, of course I'll change it. I can just go in and change the pictures, and sometimes people can't even tell. I can keep moving them and take one off and change the sequence of some. So I think this is the clarity now after all these years. When I made the *Zakir* book in 1986, that's all I wanted to do. But I didn't have the confidence. So I thought, First of all, I have to be a photo-journalist, and then someone who makes books. And the book was pulped. It didn't even sell on the footpath. Nobody wanted it. But this was 1986, you know. First I thought, I have to be a photo-journalist. Then I thought, I have to make exhibitions. It was as if I was unfaithful to my first love, the book, from whom I started to take the prints out and put them on the wall for my exhibitions.

SR: You make that hierarchy now, but I think that one leads to the other. Without having your photographs on the wall, you probably wouldn't have started the structures because you suddenly had that interest in bringing two aspects together.

DS: Exactly, because the museums always said, We love your books, but what do we do with them? How do we display them? Do we put them in a vitrine or do we project them as facsimiles? None of this appealed to me.

SR: A lot of the things you talk about when you talk about bookmaking, like intimate viewing, are now realized in the structures because, with them, you create spaces. In the same way, looking at contact sheets is also realized in the structures.

DS: We have big structures and small structures. If the big one is too much for you, on the wall you'll find a little structure. In the little structure there are three images, but you can't choose the images. I choose them. But you can look at them in any sequence. And these are the great strengths of photography. I love this medium you can do so much with. The possibilities are endless. And now with technology, who knows? You just don't know what's going to happen and where it will all go. I don't want to be limited, and if I find that the art-world is limiting me, then I have to go on a sabbatical.

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SR: You said photography is 10 per cent of your work and you said editing is one of the most important ways of transforming your photographs into how you are going to show them in a book or structure. So, it would be interesting to talk about that and the relationship of that process to literature.

DS: I think making the photographs is, as I said before, like gathering the raw material. I used to think of it like gathering words – having a big desk or a big board full of words and then seeing where the connections are, where one wants to break the connections, where one wants to make less of a connection, where one wants to withhold, where one wants to add. That is when the photographs really come alive because they need to be transformed. Photographs on their own are just not enough and you said, and I thought that was even more interesting, it's like having these fantastic paints. You've worked out how to make just the right red, the madder red, which has to have a certain amount of yellow as a base to get that red, but you can't get it in another way. So you know all that, and you know how to make those images. You know how to make beautiful paints, but then you have to make a painting and only then will the paint realise itself. For me, only when I make the form does the work really realise itself. I say to you often that the photograph has two dates, like the photograph of Nalin and Natasha. That was made in 1996 but it's really gaining its form now. It's my image for this entire show. It's the image for me now. It has become the image for *Go Away Closer*, which was also a pre-existing body of work. The photographs get a life when they have a form, and then that form has to be allowed to change. You have to – you or any other publisher, the institution, the curator – you have to allow me that, and if you don't allow me that I'm going to have to fight for that. I have to allow

this change to happen. So the image of Natasha and Nalin also, I think, works very well in *Longing*, a body of work by my friend, Prabuddha Dasgupta. Now I have to rethink the caption because I remembered that I had *actually* dedicated the photo to him when he died last year around this time because I thought that's such a *Longing* photo. I think the resources, for me, to do the editing is the training in music – not my own training but just by being around musicians for such extended periods. Yesterday, when I was photographing Zakir, I was sitting on stage and I thought when you're 18 and your mentor is a genius, not just talented but an absolute genius of rhythm, how can you not do something special with that? Even if I was a moron I would have imbibed so much, and I still imbibe so much, and I still will be on my knees, sitting on stage, even though I'm wearing a sari and I'm so much older. It was still like I was 18, there with my camera and Zakir was playing a fantastic solo concert. The other thing I realised from Zakir was that the tabla is actually an accompanying instrument, but Zakir changed that. He transformed the tabla into a solo instrument, and how. Now, it's almost as if anyone who plays with him – and Zakir gets angry when people say this – that person becomes the accompanist. It's as if the drummer is the main musician. That is also such a learning in itself. But the other thing my mother pointed out to me at the concert is that this thing I talk about: rigour and restraint in Indian classical music, in rhythm as well as in the raags, there's a beat. You have a certain configuration of notes to work with, whether you're singing or playing the tabla. It's not free-floating. You can't just keep elaborating. Yet, you must elaborate. So, unlike Western classical music, which is fixed and you can elaborate maybe only that much, here you have these fixed notes. It's a question of how you combine those notes, and that's your genius. So, for myself, too, while editing, I like to have a restriction. I like to have certain set notes and then I play with them.

SR: What is your restriction? Or is it different each time?

DS: Each time is different, but often I think of a tone or I think this is not the right tone, and I mean more a musical tone rather than a visual tone, it's just not the right tone. And if I want to create a disharmony in that it's a very deliberate disharmony. When I put one image from *Interior Landscapes* into the *Museum of Chance*, it shakes up that whole piece. But if I were to put six *Interior Landscapes* in there, it no longer has that power. It's sort of knowing when to continue in the harmonious way, when to break it and then to come back to the harmony. I'm not sure that I can explain it properly, but someone who could explain the rhythm cycles better, maybe Talvin Singh, would be able to talk about it more clearly than me. Depending on what form I'm thinking of, if I'm, say, thinking of a piece that is frantic, then I look at my photographs and try to find that pitch in the work. I will take from wherever it comes. It doesn't matter what form I've shown it in before, where I've shown it, what size I've shown it in. If I need it now I'm going to pull it out. If I need the girl on the bed, I'm going to have to pull her out. It goes back to the idea of the informed intuition, that dreaded word in the Western world, for some reason.

SR: No, I don't think it's as dreaded as you think. Lots of painters would talk about intuition. Think of Francis Bacon. I think of him throwing paint and stepping on his photographs. He too spoke of accidents.

DS: Yes. Recognising the accident and knowing how to use the accident is perhaps the skill. Accidents happen to everybody, but maybe an artist is someone who sees the power of accidents and then makes something out of that power. But informed intuition also accounts for the part of the work that you can't explain. I can't explain to you what holds the *Museum of Chance* together. Yet, one wrong note and I can hear it, though I may not take it out because I want that wrong note there. An *Interior Landscape* is a wrong note there, but a brilliant one. If I install it without that image it will be a different *Museum of Chance*. The key to that edit is to reduce, reduce, reduce. I may have started *Museum of Chance* with 700 images, and now I've come down to about 78. Then, if someone comes in and says, I don't like this image, can we take this out? Or, Can we bring this in? No, it doesn't work like that. Yes, we can bring it in, but then it disrupts the entire symphony that has been created there.

SR: You would never ever take a note out of a composition.

DS: Exactly. You can't say, Oh, I'm sorry, that C sharp is just too much, which sometimes curators try to do. And then it takes away the core of the work. It takes the spine out of the work. It's a very dangerous process. When I'm editing I try not to involve anybody. I carry it in my head, and that's why I become quite stressed and tense because the edit is in my head and in my dreams and I'm not talking to anybody about it

because I don't want to give words to it. Sometimes, a conversation helps you reveal something and bring something to the front, but editing time is when you have to nurture the plant. You have to be very careful…

SR: Not to disturb it.

DS: Yes, and any voice can disturb it. So you have to guard it and, at the same time, you have to have, if you're lucky, one or two people in your life that you can go to if you're really getting stuck, as you can do after about six weeks of working on an edit. I'm very fortunate that I've always had at least one, if not two, people like that in my life I can go to and say, I'm now stuck with this. And they might not even do anything, but just the process of my conversation with them will release something, as it has happened with you in the last few days. That is brilliant and that is very lucky, but 90 or 95 per cent of the editing is done by myself, based on my experience of the music I've been listening to and the books I've been reading. There are certain classics for me that, if I'm getting stuck, I just have to dip into Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* or a book of poems by Vikram Seth; just one poem, sometimes just a sentence.

SR: And it releases something.

DS: It releases something and I say, Oh my god, I didn't think of that! Or how amazing that Geoff Dyer makes a book about *The Stalker*, or that he writes two parallel novels. You see, in *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi* it was as though there were two novels: one set in Varanasi, another in Venice. He just hinged them together, and you're never sure if it is the same person in both, and I still don't know if it's the same story, or two novels that he's stitched together. Then there's *Zona* where you think he's talking about *The Stalker* – and he *is* talking about *The Stalker* in that brilliant Geoff Dyer way – but then he has footnotes running below. Earlier, there were two parts in the book, now he has cut it in half and there's the *Stalker* work on top and his footnotes below, and they are not academic footnotes at all. I don't know any other book that has done that, and it's as if another novel has been composed there. Calvino did it in one way, and Geoff Dyer in another way. John Berger did it in a different way. But for me, Calvino and Geoff Dyer make a form for everything they do. Take Geoff Dyer's *Out of Sheer Rage*, the book he did about D.H. Lawrence. That's such a freeing book for any artist. I often recommend it to artists, and ask them to save it for a time when they have a writer's block or they are depressed, because it's such a hilarious book about trying to write a book about Lawrence that never gets written. And the moment you think you've got Geoff Dyer, that okay, he's writing about jazz, he is onto photography. And you say, okay, he is doing photography in *The Ongoing Moment*, but then he is onto Tarkovsky. Maybe there's a connection between photography and Tarkovsy, for me there certainly is, and then he's onto… I lost the thread. But there are no boxes. How come Geoff Dyer doesn't have any boxes? Because his work doesn't allow for those boxes. From Calvino and Geoff Dyer I have learnt that each work has to have its own form. I think it would be a tragedy if suddenly all my books became accordion-fold books or all my work went into these structures. It's not even that you *decide* the form. It reveals itself slowly. It's about having patience and trusting your process. And how do you trust your process? Why is that you may not trust your process at 18 and you do at 52? There's a colleague of mine who says, Oh Dayanita is what she is because of the men she knows. At first I used to think, What a sexist thing to say! But it's actually *true*. When you've had a mentor like Zakir at age 18, you can imagine what it is to have the support, the belief, of someone who is such a genius in his field. I've just been very lucky because I've always somehow found people who are brilliant at what they do, but have also been very supportive of what I have done. I was saying to you yesterday that I would drop everything on this earth and go for that conversation.

SR: You also said yesterday that you just know where it is worth having a conversation. I think that is a very important skill for you.

DS: It has to be like that. How can you not know? How can you not know that this tour of caves with another artist friend is the most important thing in your life at this time? To hell with any boyfriend or family or friend who can't understand that. I'm quite happy not to have any of those. I want to keep my life free and open. Everything has to be flexible because who knows when I get that call from my friend of the caves? Sometimes, there's a book that needs to be read, like the Patrick White book that I've just started. And I think, Is there a way I can stay two more days in Bombay with this great sea view and just read that book. I'm somehow feeling that I must read it right now. And knowing that is important for me. Not that it's going to affect what I do. It's never *that* calculated.

SR: The other central part of the editing is that there seem to be main characters in your work who are sometimes more visible and sometimes less visible, but they seem to be quite essential for the edit. Would you say, for instance, that Mona is someone who's prevalent and plays a part in the way you edit?

DS: Yes, somehow Mona, a whole family in Calcutta. By that I mean, my original friend was the grandmother, then the mother became my friend, and my latest friend is the granddaughter. They somehow always appear. And the man that you see in the *Machines Museum*, who I said is the keeper of the *Machines Museum*, is actually the grandfather of the girl on the bed. And the girl on the bed is my friend the Calcutta friend's daughter, and that man is the friend's father-in-law.

SR: So there is a kind of connection.

DS: I don't know how. It's not Calcutta really, it's these three families that are there in *Privacy*, the big green tree in *Dream Villa* was shot at the keeper of the *Machines Museum*'s 50th wedding anniversary. I get a headache when I try to think of it and draw these things out. But this family just shows up in every project that I've done. They are even physically there. The *Machines* actually started because my friend's husband said, Would you mind going to my father's factory and photographing some of the machines? I thought, if anybody else had asked me that I would say, What do you think I am? I had no interest in machines at that time. I went to the factory and I took some pictures and I realised that it was a very busy sort of factory, so I thought I'd come back and we'd have to make some kind of a structure. But I came back and looked at the pictures and I thought, No, no, no, these are not just machines, these are sculptures. This is something organic. There's personality, there's gender. I could have names for all those machines. Then I went back into my archive and I find all the machines from the *Blue Book* time. Pre-*Blue Book* as well.

SR: You realised it was a museum of machines?

DS: Yes. So it's about being open, trusting one's intuition and being open to these messages. I guess, if I have the courage to say it, it's about trusting in life.

SR: For the Hayward show, it is also Mona who's kind of prevalent in it.

DS: If you talk about a day-to-day friend, Mona's the one I'm in touch with every day, more than my mother, more than anybody else. So she has to be present in everything. And I think the reason why she's also been a friend for so long is because she's very unusual. She has a very different

take on any situation. I can show her the machines pictures and she'll have something to say to me about them. We have very interesting conversations. So she's very present in every work that I do. But I also know that if I go back to Delhi and I want to really do work on a museum, I just need to have Rashid Khan playing 24 hours. It's not like you just listen to it once, it's on and on and on for two weeks, and it sinks into you and affects the poses that you will give in the work, the pacing of the work. I think the literature shows me the various possibilities, knowing just when to stop, like Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*. Still today I do not know whether that family ever made it to the wedding, because on the way they got a puncture and had a picnic, and you never heard about the wedding again. Editing for me is very much about knowing when to take something away, when to pull the plug on it, so that you really want to know: Did Mona ever get Ayesha back? What happened to Ayesha? If the book had been a complete story, you would have no questions. I think it's really important to leave you with some work to do. Like, why is this *Interior Landscape* in the middle of these very evocative photos? Why does she do that?

SR: You were showing me that book on film editing.

DS: Yes, *The Conversations* between Michael Ondaatje and Walter Murch. That is absolutely brilliant. For a while, I got obsessed with Beatriz Colomina and the films of Alexander Kluge. I even have photos I took that I thought I might include in the *Museum of Chance*. Alexander Kluge does the same thing of taking a book and underlining the things that are important. Something is building up in me with the underlining of books, which I do obsessively. And photographing them too, because I may read something in a book of yours, and I don't have time to get the book, so I'll just take a picture. My phone is full of photos of important texts, but like a fool I never photograph the covers, so I don't know where they're from. They become random texts that seem the most important at that time. So I realise that with the iPhone there is an edit going on all the time, but it is a very personal edit because I'm just picking up notes, and that's what these digital things are great for. There's something in those words. It could be part of a sentence. It doesn't have to be the full text. The readings provide the background for the editing, and I know there are these various forms available to me, and now who knows what Patrick White will unfurl?

SR: You use text in your work. It keeps coming back. Now for the museums you want them to be integrated.

DS: Every time we've shown the Mona work, I'm really frustrated because her letters are not there and her language is not there. So Mona to me, I always used to say, is the biggest failure of my life's work because I could never make a true portrait of hers. Then this film happened by complete accident. I'm calling it a film, but it's actually just a moving still. It's more a portrait of Mona; it doesn't have her words; it doesn't have her story; it doesn't have her environment, which, as we know, is dramatic beyond words. It's just her. Yet, it's a life story. There is a full biography in that little film.

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DS: The reason I can do this kind of editing is because I work from contact sheets, and the most important tool for my editing are those brown books that you saw with the squiggly writing all over them. It's somehow crucial to have all the contact sheets in this book form. Think of them as an encyclopaedia of all my images. I have the idea that there's a lamp, a woman, a hand on the neck, and it's almost like you get this slightly sick *déjà vu*, as I got when editing *Go Away Closer*. Then you get into this frenzy. You have to find an image, and you go through these contact sheets, and it's almost as if you can't breathe, and god help the person who calls at that time or rings the doorbell, for then it can just stop. You have to follow it through. Even if it's three in the morning when that thought comes to you, you have to work on it and pull the images out, and you say, Actually, it's no big deal. You pull them out, have the negatives scanned, have these little prints made, and you put them together, and you say, It's nothing, and you move on. Or you say, Oh, but, there's the foot and there's that notebook and the pen, and there was that bed at the back with the stripes. And the stripes, what happened with the stripes? Oh, that curtain when I was in Florence in Fausto's house, that had the same print as that chair. It's like allowing the mind to go where it wants to instead of saying, No, no, no, now I'm looking for machines because Stephanie said machines and so we're going to do machines. To just be open. That's why it's important to not have too many voices in your head, and the voices you have, have to be the really trusted ones.

SR: You go to them at the right moment.

DS: Yes. I don't want anyone to tell me, this is what it's about, because then it's finished. So when Aveek said he wanted to write about the *Museum of Chance*, somewhere I was resistant to that because I thought that when he writes about it, it will stop there. I would have worked it out, and right now it's more a gut feeling. That tone in my head, the musical tone, the pitch that's in my head, that's what I'm working with, and I trust that completely. And the reason I can go back into my archive is that I always work intuitively. Other than my commercial assignments, and sometimes you have to do commercial assignments that are not really true to you, I can dip into my work any time, and as long as I am doing things that are really for myself, it all comes together, they all hold together.

SR: Is there anything you would say you learned at all, or was that something you were always good at? Or was it something that came later into your work?

DS: No, I think the fundamentals of editing, in a much larger sense, were all laid down in all those years of travelling with Indian classical musicians and Zakir. How they would put a concert, an evening, together, how a raag would be divided into these different parts, and be a collection of certain fixed notes, yet your genius was in how you could play with those fixed notes. It's not entirely whimsical, but you create something out of this restriction. I was telling you yesterday about restraint. So, the larger map for editing was emotionally embedded in me by the musicians. But I remember when I read Michael Ondaatje *Running in the Family*, in 2001 perhaps, I had this sort of flash moment when I said, My god, this is what editing is! Knowing when to stop, what to leave out. And what you piece together is the story and it doesn't have to be this linear story. You've got to be thinking about someone else through it. Sometimes it doesn't work, and what can you do then? You can't do it any other way. The one time I've had to work with someone else's interference it was neither here nor there, because it's this orphan child. It's not mine. It's not the other person's. It's something else and it will remain like that. So, it's really important to trust in your own editing process, to fuel it with the music, the writing, and the conversations. But finally, you are completely alone.

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