

MP: Last question – and not Steidl-related – did you really steal Diana Vreeland’s door knocker?

DB: Tried to.

MP: It didn’t come off?

DB: No, it’s in her autobiography. Jack [Nicholson] and I tried to unscrew it. It was four o’clock in the morning. And she was tearful in the back of the car. And there’s Jack and I trying to steal the door knocker, one of those lion door knockers. Luckily the police didn’t come. *[laughs]*

MP: And she was tearful because you couldn’t get it?

DB: No, she was just remembering when she lived in London before the war, probably in the thirties. She was half British, Vreeland. But you never knew with Vreeland because it was always fantasy.

An hour later, shortly before departing for Home House, Bailey places a cigarette in his mouth and reaches for a box of matches. He strikes a match and Steidl pounces – the cigarette is the wrong way round, the filter dangles from his lips. Bailey rotates the cigarette, lights it, and laughs as he inhales. The curls of smoke and laughter disperse into the air.

Dayanita Singh

‘I want something ordinary on the outside and like a jewel inside.’

New Delhi, 20 September 2009

Dayanita Singh’s *Sent a Letter* is a linen-covered cardboard box containing seven little books of black-and-white photographs. The linen is thin, coarse, and of a dull cream colour that accumulates dirt. The linen has been crudely cut and glued to the inside and outside of the box; the fabric’s fraying edges are visible in places. The box sits comfortably in one’s hand. This is a complete but unfinished, humble, and welcoming object.

One opens the box by taking it in two hands and ‘unfolding’ it – there is no separate lid. Doing so reveals a hollow in which the seven books nestle. The books are nine centimetres wide and thirteen and a half centimetres high, bound in flexible cardboard, and stand vertically in their box as if on a miniature library shelf. Six books are fawn-coloured; the seventh is olive-brown. The spine of each fawn book bears one of six Indian place names written vertically in black Helvetica capitals: ‘Allahabad’, ‘Bombay’, ‘Calcutta’, ‘Devisgarh’, ‘Padmanabhapuram’, and ‘Varanasi’. The woman’s name ‘Nony Singh’ adorns the spine of the olive-brown book.

Between the covers of each book is a long strip of paper folded into concertina form. Photographs, mostly square in format, occupy one side of the strip, so that when unfolded it can be stood on a horizontal surface and its photographs ‘read’ (from left to right?). The images depict a spectrum of environments across India: private and public, natural and urban, impoverished and lavish, with and without people. Individual compositions include shelves laden with white crockery, a herd of goats walking down a street past parked cars, a crowded market place, dark ocean waves breaking against rocks, a fluorescent lamp on a bedside table, and empty corridors.

Printed in black across the four sides of the box – one must turn the box in one’s hands to read the text – are the words: ‘Sent a letter to my friend, on the way he dropped it. Someone came and picked it up and put it in his pocket.’

Monte Packham: How did *Sent a Letter* become what it became?

Dayanita Singh: The story began in 2006 when Gerhard came to Calcutta with Günter Grass. We spent a few days there, perhaps three, just wandering. Gerhard had wanted to see some of the paper- and book-making parts of the city, so I found some places and our long walks together I took pictures – as I often do when travelling with friends. These were just photographs of things we passed, perhaps things Gerhard pointed to – once he went and

talked to a goat and I took a picture of it – all very casual.

When I came back to New Delhi I did what I've been doing for many years which is to put all the photographs into a black Moleskine, connected together as a remembrance of a time shared with someone, and as a way to say thank you. I made two books: kept one for myself and sent one to Gerhard. Of course there was no response from him. [laughs]

A little while later Gerhard was in London and I was there too, staying at the Frith Street Gallery apartment. I took him upstairs to show him my copy of his book and he said, 'We should do something with this.'

'No no no,' I said, 'this is my own little project: it's too private, it was only meant for you.'

'No no no, we'll definitely do something with it.'

'But what should I do?' I said. 'I have all these books – I must have five on Calcutta alone, each about a different journey with a different friend.'

'Don't touch them. Don't try to make a "Calcutta" volume,' he replied. 'We're going to print these books exactly as you made them.' And that's what we did. I think it was in 2007 when we made *Go Away Closer* that I said to Gerhard I would like the book to be ordinary on the outside and like a jewel inside. So when it came to *Sent a Letter*, I said I would like a jewel box for these seven books – but on the outside very simple. When I got back home I started working on the box using the fabric we use for posting parcels in India: in the end three thousand boxes were shipped from New Delhi to Göttingen!

MP: How did the concertina form of the books take shape?

DS: When I began making these books in 2002, I was lucky enough to go on a number of journeys with some incredible minds, writers and thinkers, and I thought: 'What can I give them? I can't just give them one little

print.' So I started making these books and discovered the Japanese Moleskine with the concertina form. I made one for my friend Fausto when I visited his house in Florence. He then took the book to Greece and left it at someone's house by mistake. Another friend took his book to Washington and put it in his office. So over time the books spread and began to form a secret exhibition taking place in different parts of the world. The concertina structure is also important because each strip of images is composed like a piece of writing. And there are hidden codes in them – in the Calcutta book for instance, there are things that only Gerhard and I would know the significance of.

MP: For whom was one of the other books in *Sent a Letter* made?

DS: I made the Allahabad book for Sunil Khilnani who wrote *The Idea of India*. He was in Allahabad doing research for his biography on Nehru and I went with him. While he was working I did what I know how to do which is to take pictures, but I kept thinking to myself, 'Sunil would like to see this,' and 'Sunil would like a record of that.' So after I came home I made a book for him and one for myself. Similarly the Devigarh book is about a trip I took with him to Devigarh. Often the person I'm with is standing right next to me when I take a picture – I might be the one pressing the shutter, but the image is actually a conversation that takes place between that friend and myself about the very thing I'm photographing.

MP: And the seventh book 'Nony Singh' named after your mother?

DS: That's a book I made for my mother of her photographs. She's always made albums of everything – she even has an album of my father's girlfriends. So I thought it would be nice to make her my version of one of her albums. We gave the book a different coloured cover to distinguish it from the others, although I never wanted it to be clear that these are my mother's pictures and that I'm often the one photographed. Some who see the book realise these are her photographs, and others don't – an Australian friend of mine thought they were self-portraits of me pretending to be someone else. And Gerhard is a great accomplice in these kinds of secrets that will never be resolved; they've become a big part of our book-making.

MP: *Sent a Letter* has been exhibited in a variety of environments, most charmingly in a jewellery store – how did that happen?

DS: In 2008 I showed *Sent a Letter* in a gallery in Calcutta where I had an exhibition

of the ladies of Calcutta, of all the women I've ever photographed there. We'd made little shelves for the books but they were getting lost and somehow I wanted other audiences for *Sent a Letter* - now that I had this mass-produced object and not a limited edition, I didn't quite see the point in only showing it in an awe-inspiring gallery environment.

I had the box in my hand and had gone out for coffee behind the gallery when I walked past this beautiful jewellery store [Satramdas Dhalamal] with empty vitrines in the windows. 'This is it!' I thought. 'It's just waiting for my books.' So I went in and introduced myself to the owner, Raj Mahtani, who luckily knew and admired my work.

'Fantastic,' I said. 'Perhaps then there's something you could do for me?'

'Sure.'

'How about giving me your windows?'

'Please do whatever you like,' came the reply.

And the books are still there! Gathering dust. Raj makes big jewels, so he can't put them in the window. Outside the jewellery store is a little *paan* shop and its owner has become the guide to the exhibition and tells people which place each book depicts, as you can't see the names on the spines when you stretch out the books. In the end, all the discussions I'd ever had with Gerhard about whether a book can be the art object in itself realised themselves in *Sent a Letter*.

Once the paper concertina of each book in *Sent a Letter* has been folded together, the seven books returned to their box, and the box closed, one is left with a quiet object whose unassuming exterior belies the photographs held within it. Yet while this object is quiet, it is not silent: 'Sent a letter to my friend, on the way he dropped it. Someone came and picked it up and put it in his pocket.' These words not only colour one's appreciation of Singh's photographs, but suggest that *Sent a Letter* is something to be passed on - that it is indeed intended for someone else. Here lies its contradictory charm: the impulse to give away a jewel-like object one does not want to part with.