

NOW WE CAN SEE

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Arriving at Indira Gandhi International Airport in 2006, I was confronted by an unusually impressive advertisement. It featured a big and grainy black-and-white photograph of the tabla player Zakir Hussain and his dad Ustad Alla Rakha in concert, some time in the mid 1980s, I guessed. Zakir's dad is reaching over and patting his son's head, ruffling his hair as if to congratulate the puppy on having barked with such enthusiastic promise. But, with this loving gesture, the pre-eminent tabla player of one generation – in the famous Concert for Bangladesh it's the grinning Alla Rakha we see accompanying Ravi Shankar on sitar and Ali Akbar Khan on sarod – is also passing on the musical baton to the man Bill Laswell will later describe as 'the greatest rhythm player that this planet has ever produced'.¹ Quite a claim!

The picture turned out to be by Dayanita Singh, who, in one of the little home-made-looking photographic journals from the box set *Sent a Letter* (Steidl, 2008), has constructed a tribute to her mum: a passing back of something that was never quite a baton. The other six books in the set take their names from places in India – 'Calcutta', 'Bombay' and so on – whereas this one, with its slightly darker cover, is named after Dayanita's mother, Nony Singh. It's made up of either pictures Nony took or of ones she – Nony – found in her husband's cupboard. There are quite a few pictures of a little girl with a determined little pout or frowning smile who is clearly Dayanita.

Is that smile-pout a precocious sign of ambition? When the 18-year-old Dayanita first went to photograph Hussain at a concert the organisers tried to prevent her and she tripped over. Embarrassed but undeterred she called out 'Mr Hussain, I am a young student today, but someday I will be an important photographer, and then we will see.'² Mr Hussain liked this spirited response and allowed the student to travel with him and his fellow



musicians, to document his life on the road and at home. The picture at Delhi airport was from *Zakir Hussain* (Himalayan Books, 1986), the book that resulted from this – Dayanita’s first.

Now that her injured boast has been made good, another kind of continuity can be seen. It too can be illustrated musically. Many of the greatest living female singers of the Karnatic and Hindustani classical traditions are in their sixties or seventies. As they take slowly to the stage they look magisterial, imposing, grand – conscious of the immensity of their reputations. It can take them a while to get seated, cross-legged, but when these ladies start to sing the years fall away to reveal a lovely girlishness. A part of time has been stopped. Their voices are light-footed and graceful as the *gopis* spied upon by Krishna – but with the knowledge, wisdom and, often, sadness of age. Now look again at that box set of diaries, *Sent a Letter*: in its high-art-home-spun way, it’s not unlike the kind of thing you might have tried to make as a kid in art classes – and it’s as far removed from a super-sized Andreas Gursky or Thomas Struth as one could get. *Go Away Closer* (Steidl, 2007) looks like a school exercise book. The book of *Dream Villa* photographs (Steidl, 2010) – many of them printed quite large in exhibitions – seems intended to pass itself off as a pocket diary. This last, in my view, is a perverse decision and major aesthetic mistake – what is the gain in having the double-page, full-bleed spreads dominated by the gutter? – but the general point stands: playfulness, pleasure in the possibilities of the modest and the miniature, are not at odds with seriousness; they are part of what enabled Dayanita to become ‘an important photographer’.

While it was perfectly natural for Zakir to become a tabla player – as Martin Amis says somewhere, there’s nothing more normal than what your dad does – there were numerous obstacles to be overcome if the young student was to turn her mum’s hobby into a vocation and profession. These were



obstacles born of expectation: what was expected of young women in India and what was expected from Indian photographers and photographs of India generally. With Dayanita's work there is a subtle but clear break from the teeming streets of Raghu Rai and the crowd of colours associated with Raghubir Singh, in favour of a photography that is quiet, intimate, private, withdrawn: an art, increasingly, of absence.

In one of the pictures by her mum, the baby Dayanita is barely visible; in a couple of others she is entirely overlooked in favour of the splendid surroundings of a hotel room. The grown-up daughter has followed suit: her pictures are full of empty rooms, empty beds and what Billy Collins calls 'the chairs that no one sits in': 'where no one / is resting a glass or placing a book facedown'.³ The poet is here thinking of permanently empty – rather than briefly vacated – chairs, but in photography, of course, even the momentary becomes permanent. And in photographic terms, these empty chairs have always been with us. Or at least, as John Szarkowski, former Director of Photography at MoMA, argues, they did not mean 'the same thing before photography as they mean to us now'.⁴

About half of the pictures in *Privacy* (Steidl, 2004) are portraits of people in their opulent homes – spacious rooms crowded with wealth and flesh. The effect of these is to make the other half, the empty interiors, seem... even emptier! And then there are the museum rooms of Anand Bhavan (now Swaraj Bhavan), the former Nehru family residence in Allahabad, where we get a redoubled, much-multiplied emptiness: unworn clothes hanging on the unopened doors of empty rooms. The glaring absence in these pictures, these rooms, is of the present (as symbolised by the stilled ceiling fan). This is what time looks like after history has moved on and left it for dead.

Referring to his own photographs of empty interiors, Walker Evans once

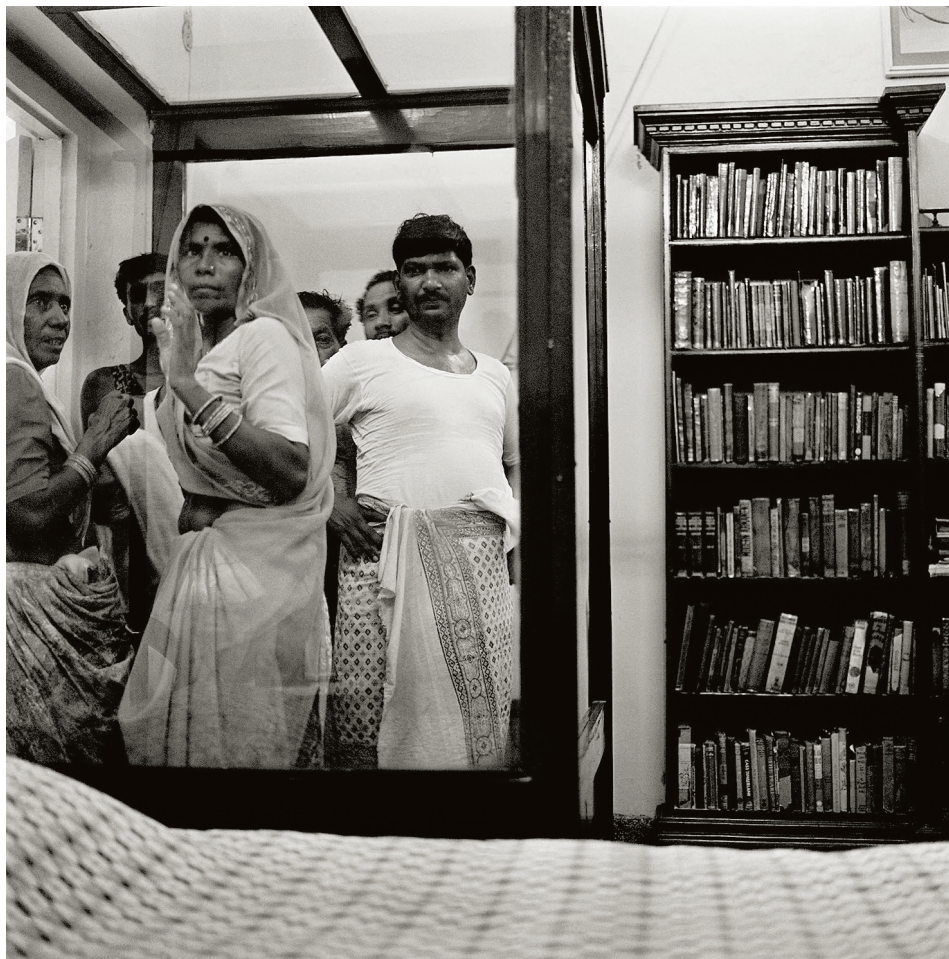


said, 'I do like to suggest people sometimes by their absence. I like to make you feel that an interior is *almost* inhabited by somebody.'⁵ The dominant suggestion in Dayanita's rooms is not so much of the absence of people so much as the *lack* of their absence: the idea of people, I mean, doesn't rush in to fill the vacancy. The wide-awake day-bed, the armchair never passing up a chance to take the weight off its feet, the books wanting nothing more than to curl up with a good book – all are perfectly content with the prospect of an evening on their own, undisturbed by human intrusion.

What Dayanita shares with Evans is the ability to suggest another, rarer, absence: that of the photographer. Making it seem that the room itself had done the photographing was Evans' paradoxical and signature gift: the air of anonymity – 'the non-appearance of author', as he put it – that enables us to identify an Evans *as* an Evans.⁶ In this he both expressed an ideal – of the photographer disappearing into his photographs – and harked back to the dawn of the medium, to William Henry Fox Talbot's claim about an image made in 1835: 'this building I believe to be the first that was ever yet known *to have drawn its own picture*.'⁷

The silent atmosphere of places surveying themselves pervades Dayanita's rooms, corridors and halls. It's at its most extreme in a picture of (so extreme it seems more appropriate to write 'picture *by*') the library in Anand Bhavan (*Visitors at Anand Bhavan, Allahabad, 2000, overleaf*). There *are* people in this photograph – visitors peering in through the glass that preserves and isolates the room – but the sense of latent sentience is so strong that a kind of role reversal occurs: as if the room itself is regarding a vitrine displaying these time-frozen specimens of life-sized humanity.

Elsewhere this sense is enhanced and signalled by the way that the rooms often contain other photographs, either actual ones – hanging on walls,



propped on shelves – or, less tangibly, in the form of reflections: in shining floors and polished furnishings, in windows and mirrors. (It's often impossible, in photographs, to tell the difference between a mirror and a photo. In a photo, in fact, a mirror is automatically transformed *into* a photo. A photo, let's say, is a mirror with the time taken out of it.) The effect of these layers of self-seeing – inanimate, passive and abiding – is a cumulative laying bare of essence: the stillness of still photography. That's one way of seeing and putting it. Another, by a visitor to the 2007 exhibition of the *Go Away Closer* photographs, at the Kriti Gallery in Varanasi, was to copy into the visitors' book some lines in Urdu from a *ghazal* by Faiz Ahmad Faiz called 'Hum Dekhenge' ('We Will See'):

*All that will remain is Allah's name,
He who is absent but present too,
He who is the seer as well as the seen.*

Light stares whitely through the windows. These windows reflect on the interiors – as we have seen – and provide visual access to the world outside. What happens when we gaze through them? What do we see?

To answer this we first have to re-familiarise ourselves with the terrain – get an overview of how the documentary impulse in early series such as *I Am As I Am* (started in 1999) and *Myself Mona Ahmed* (1989–2001) gradually softens to something anchored less directly in place and time. Bear in mind, also, that the divisions between Dayanita's projects and books have never been absolute. A picture from *Go Away Closer* also appears in *Sent a Letter* and again in *Privacy*, and so on. The piles and shelves of documents in the recent *File Room* (Steidl, 2013) are prefigured by the libraries and piled-up books and lockers of *Privacy*. Effectively, then, the pictures are all the time overlooking each other, glancing over each other's shoulders. You can, in



other words, glance out of the windows of a tower in Devi Garh and gaze down at Padmanabhapuram. Until recently, you could be fairly certain that the place you looked out from – and at – was somewhere in India, but that’s no longer the case. Come to think of it, a place might not even be a place – just a wall that’s nowhere in particular with the image of a photographer drawn on it.

You can tell by the face of the woman in this mural – the photographic equivalent, surely, of Dayanita’s tag – that this revealed and self-observing world is constantly surprising itself. Dayanita’s work seems to advance by a series of rhythmic astonishments – ‘Ooh, I wasn’t expecting that!’ – so calmly accepted that they appear almost to have been intended.

This is most noticeable in Dayanita’s shift to colour. Colour photography famously got going in the West in the 1970s – ‘the early Christian era of colour photography’, as Joel Sternfeld fondly terms it.⁸ For his part, Raghubir Singh wrote that if photography had been invented in India there would have been no need for all the theoretical hand-wringing and claims of heresy.⁹ Dayanita, on the other hand, dutifully worked through black-and-white – from documentary and reportage to the more elliptical style of *Go Away Closer* – before lurching accidentally into colour. *Blue Book* (Steidl, 2009) was the result of running out of black-and-white film on a shoot. No problem, she thought, just turn it into black-and-white later. Except this was daylight film (colour-adjusted to the intensity or ‘colour temperature’ of daylight), it was after sunset, and so the contacts came out blue. This blue period was short-lived – of stark, if limited, aesthetic usefulness – but the miscalibrated rainbow beckoned, and soon she was in the midst of exactly the kind of ‘spontaneous colour experience’ proclaimed by László Moholy-Nagy.¹⁰ Having tumbled into colour as people stumble into darkness – now we shall see! – she glided into the gorgeous nocturnes of *Dream Villa*.



This move was both unexpected and unsurprising in equal measure. The very last words quoted by the tabla genius in *Zakir Hussain* look ahead to the colour-trance of Dayanita's tropical oneiric: 'Maybe it's a dream world, maybe it's make-believe, but it's beautiful.'¹¹ Either way, as Gillian Welch puts it, 'she showed me colours I'd never seen'.

So what makes a 'Dream Villa'? How does Dayanita know she's found one? The answer, surely, is that she doesn't, or, more accurately, that the question *is* the answer. The *Dream Villa* pictures are all uncaptioned because the places in them don't exist. Yes, they're out there in the world somewhere and she photographs them in that interrogative way of photographers, but it's only later, when they've stopped being places and become photographs, that it's possible to see if what was once reality – or a piece of real estate, at any rate – has acquired the ideal and elusive aura of the dream image.

The image that illustrates this most vividly is of a thin tree – more twig than tree – bathed in deep red light (p. 26). Michael Ackerman's first book of photographs, *End Time City* (Scalo, 1999) was obviously about an actual place: Varanasi. But in his next book, *Fiction* (Delpire, 2001), Ackerman decided he 'no longer wanted to see any information in [his] pictures'.¹² That's what we have here: a picture in which there is almost no information – just night, red light and trees. No before and no after, and therefore no narrative: the opposite, in a way, of an Edward Hopper painting. Wim Wenders said that Hoppers always prompt us to construct little stories or movies – before-and-after scenarios: 'A car will drive up to a filling station, and the driver will have a bullet in his belly.'¹³ It's not just that the *Dream Villa* pictures do not provoke a response of this kind; they make it seem entirely inappropriate. The red is presumably from a car's tail- or brake-lights, so a car has pulled up, but that's the full extent of the story. It does not make us curious about what the car is doing there, though it does suggest that



the way to understand this picture is by reversing into it, as it were, by the *opposite* of story-telling – that our curiosity will not be satisfied in narrative terms. There's not even the potential mystery of the crime that may or may not be illusory in Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow-Up* (although the red glow of the ground is reminiscent of the safety light in David Hemmings' darkroom), a mystery that will be revealed if we scrutinise the picture closely enough. If there is intrigue here it is in the incidental cluster of lights in the distance and over to the right: what's going on over there? There is mystery in the foreground – there is nothing *but* mystery – but not the kind that seeks an answer beyond itself. This is mysteriousness not as a goad to solving and thereby bringing the mystery to an end, but mystery as a condition in which to reside (another reason for the lack of narrative, for the lack of desire *to move on*). So it's not just stylistic clumsiness on my part that has led to this infestation of 'nots'; what we see here is a demonstration of photography's ability to depict a state of negative capability.

You look at this picture without any irritable straining after truth, content in the permanence of the fleeting mystery depicted. And, when you do this, you realise that there *is* something there, in the middle of the picture. The ghost of a figure of some kind? Another tree? A mini-tornado touching harmlessly down? Just a trace of something, no more substantial than a smudge of smoke – so, perhaps, that mention of the darkroom in *Blow-Up* was not as parenthetical as it seemed. What we share here is the essential mystery – in danger of post-digital extinction – and excitement, of the photographer watching an image emerge in the red glow of the darkroom. A different kind of negative capability: one that might even be a synonym for photography itself.

The colourful dissolution of the external in the *Dream Villa* series was followed by what cries out to be described as Dayanita's most 'substantial'



body of black-and-white work, *File Room* – a documentary record of documents! There's no room for emptiness here: sacks, cupboards, archives and cabinets are crammed full of books, papers and folders that have the weight and permanence of geological strata – minus, it goes without saying, the weight and permanence. That was an illusion – they're just pictures, after all – but how easily matters of fact become the stuff of fiction! So maybe it's not too deluded to think that if you pulled open enough drawers in one of the rooms you would find, neatly preserved and archived in some Borgesian way, *Go Away Closer*, *House of Love* and all the earlier books, along with the prints and contact sheets. Certainly it seems safe to say that this, for the moment, is where Dayanita has ended up.

It's good to have things stored, stacked and available like this, to be able to go over to the shelves – organised and arranged according to some principle that only the custodian or owner understands – and pore over the relevant volumes. And then to return them, along with another more recent amendment and addition: this one.

- 1 Quoted by Peter Lavezzoli in *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West*, Continuum, New York, 2006, p. 350.
- 2 Dayanita Singh, *Privacy*, Steidl, Göttingen, 2004, [no pagination].
- 3 Billy Collins, *Aimless Love: New and Selected Poems*, Random House, New York, 2013, p. 149.
- 4 John Szarkowski, *Atget*, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, 2000, p. 176.
- 5 Quoted by Belinda Rathbone in *Walker Evans: A Biography*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1995, p. 252.
- 6 Jerry L. Thompson, *Walker Evans at Work*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1984, p. 70.
- 7 William Henry Fox Talbot, 'Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing' (1839) in Vicki Goldberg (ed.), *Photography in Print*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, NM, 1981, p. 46.
- 8 Quoted in *Sunday Telegraph Magazine*, 28 March 2004, p. 29.
- 9 Raghubir Singh, *River of Colour: The India of Raghubir Singh*, Phaidon, London, 1998, p. 8.
- 10 László Moholy-Nagy, 'Pigment to Light' (1936) in Vicki Goldberg (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 342.
- 11 Quoted by Dayanita Singh in *Zakir Hussain*, Himalayan Books, New Delhi, 1986, p. 75.
- 12 Michael Ackerman, *Fiction*, Delpire, Paris, 2001, [no pagination].
- 13 Wim Wenders, *The Act of Seeing: Essays and Conversations*, Faber and Faber, London, 1996, p. 137.