

Conversation Chambers: Museum Bhavan at KNMA

Aveek Sen in conversation with Dayanita Singh

After walking past eight of the nine structures of Museum Bhavan, one enters the *Museum of Chance*. It is made of two monumental wooden structures whose wings house 126 black-and-white photographs. The opened wings form what appears to be a conversation chamber with its own tables and stools. The lighting is low, and there is a hush in the room in which the structures stand. The visitors move around them slowly looking at the photographs, a little uncertain about whether they should be listening to the conversation going on between the two people seated in the middle of the *Museum of Chance*.

AS Is the museum the structures? Or is it the photographs in the structures?

DS I don't know how to answer that question, because the obvious thing is to say that the museum is a house for this collection of photographs, but every time I see the structures without the images I feel it's a form in itself that suggests images. So, at a certain point, I would like to be able to empty the whole museum of its images and just have the bare structures.

AS As an artist, why are you taking on the role of the curator? That is one question that comes out of this exhibition. Linked to this, is the idea of the museum as a form. When you use the idea of the museum as a form, you also start using an associated vocabulary, like curator, storage, display, visitor, architecture...

DS Shop

AS What I am not sure about sometimes is whether that vocabulary is real or metaphorical. If it is metaphorical, then one can say that an artist is *using* the language of making and keeping museums. But if it is real, then what is it that you can't do as an artist that you can do as a museum curator? So, are you parodying or appropriating a language?

DS *Claiming* a language. I want to claim being a living artist. If I am a contemporary artist, then that means I am not dead. Whenever one works within a museum or gallery structure, at a certain point one feels that one is dead because it is the curator who decides the rhythm of how things are going to go and even if I were to decide, I cannot keep making endless changes, during the exhibition – sometimes though just for geographical reasons. **But since this exhibition is in Delhi, where I work from, I can keep producing, adding and removing photos as well as structures and new museums.**

AS There is a political dimension to this, then. It is about power.

DS Of course. It is about authorship, continuing authorship. Its like saying, if I am a living artist, of course I will change my mind, of course things will be added, of course things will grow. How can that not be? I am hoping people will come to a realization of this when they see how things are transforming with these museums.

AS It is important that you establish this right at the beginning. Otherwise, there is a risk that people might turn around and say, but you are 'museumizing' yourself, you are killing yourself by building a museum around your work.

DS No, no! In fact, I am giving myself *life*. I am a living artist, therefore I can come and work with my collection even when its installed in

another museum. I do feel that when a work goes into a museum setting, it's as though it is being held hostage by the museum, and I can't access it, I can't move things, I can't rearrange things. I think this feeling comes from years of working within that structure, and not being able to pin it down, but always being uncomfortable with it. That's why the preference for my books with Steidl. So, now I have made a structure – knowing that museums will not let me touch my museums and move them around – I have made it in such a way that I have slipped past the museum security/authority thing, and established that I *will* keep changing it, and I've written that into my manifesto for the Museum Bhavan.

AS This also brings us back to some of the content of the museum. If you think of the File Museum, what you see in them are living archives. They are not dead collections of paper. They are about people's lives. There are real people who keep these archives alive.

DS Absolutely. There's also life happening within the museums. For example, you look at the gentleman there, Sunil Dutt, tying the turban around a much younger man, Bunty. This is where the contextual reading of photography comes in. To someone who understands what that gesture means, certainly to an Indian Hindu person, this means that the young man has lost his father. If you know Hindi cinema, you might recognize who those people are. Then, in *Museum of Photography*, you might recognize the portrait of Sunil Dutt beside his own ashes. And then, again if you know your film history, you realize that in the *Museum of Chance* is his wife before she became his wife. So, there are different things, and threads of things, that are going on within and among the museums. Now, the daughters of the young man, Bunty, are in the *Little Ladies' Museum* – the photograph of the two children you said you were not sure of, and I said, no there are two more of them. There will be more images of them brought in. I am not so able to add images to some of the museums that have been acquired. But I might find a way of dealing with that. I might bring them into Chance, because

now Bunty, like me, is older and the children are grown up. In fact, his older daughter just got married. So, the museum is also alive in that sense as well and things are being added because people are still living. Remember that *Museum of Chance* starts with my earliest images from 1981.

AS With something like the *Museum of Chance*, which is such an ongoing, endless, open form, how do you keep the particularity of the museum so that it doesn't become a sort of hold-all form?

DS See, that is a very difficult thing to try and define. Why is it that when you look at about a hundred photos one knows immediately which is Chance and which is not? You and I looked at a lot of images that day, and there were a very few that became part of Chance. We looked at almost all of the Kochi work – 200 of them? – and there were just five, or three, that got into Chance – that's it. The rest were of a different **temper**.

AS Yes, each of the museums has such a particular quality that is unique to it. Can you describe this quality?

DS I suppose I could try. Perhaps we could talk about editing with tonality – that may be the only way to describe this quality. If you find your pitch, and I am again using musical language, then I know how *Museum of Chance* has to be tuned, and I think you may know this process too. But someone else may not be able to tune it the same way...

AS Because it is non-verbal – unsayable, but showable.

DS Yes. I think *File Museum* has a different pitch. So each museum is tuned slightly differently. That brings me to another question. There are many people who come in and say, we've seen these images before. It is only partly true. Because of the *Museum of Chance* book, people have seen all these images, certainly in Delhi and Bombay.

But then, people have also seen *File Room* as a book and a work. The rest of the museums – Machines, Furniture, Photography – they haven't seen, and I've been really careful to put in images that have not been seen. Technically, I couldn't put in images that are in editions already. The only one that is in an edition but is also here is the Girl on the Bed, which, before you leave, I am going to change and bring into the *File Museum*. Then we'll see what you say. But this thing about sameness that people have been saying has to do with – and I will go back to music – because I feel that I am not an entertainer who must find a new language for every show. Over many many years, I have built a certain voice, I've found my tone. I would photograph you, the table and your bag in the same way because that's my tone, and that's what people then start to read as, Oh I've seen this before. Whether I'm photographing a chair or a machine, I bring to them the set of references that has formed my voice. I don't know how to explain that to people.

AS Maybe you shouldn't.

DS Well, it's a bit annoying when people come and say they've seen these before.

AS They *think* they have.

DS Exactly. That's what I'm trying to get at.

AS There is a certain... *je ne sais quoi*...an indefinable something that you cannot put in words

DS That is the something else. You call it *je ne sais quoi*, I call it the something else. *Museum of Chance* doesn't have a single image – and if we find one, we should pull it out – that doesn't have that something else, its own something else. And that is also the thing that suggests the sameness to the people. This is also one of the burdens of photography. Every time you present a work it has to

have a new subject. It is because of the photojournalism element in the history of photography, which is tied to the ideas of novelty and information. So, when I say that my work is *not* about what is in the image, it becomes a bit of a challenge to the viewer or reader.

Another thing I wanted to say is, each of these images in the museum is very much a stand-alone image. I could not have it any other way. But I will not let you see them as single images. I am not interested in perpetuating that way of viewing images. I no longer subscribe to those art-world ideas of the single image.

AS At a micro level, then, these are museums without labels and captions. Each museum has a name, but if you ask, who is this man or who is this girl or whose house is this, you never get an answer and never get to know. Even if I happen to know who it is, and someone asks me, I don't feel like telling him or her. I find this an interesting tendency in myself: why do I not like to reveal who that man is?

DS Because that's not what the museums or my work is about. And... what if I *change* the labels? What if I call my *Museum of Furniture* the Museum of Missed Conversations, as somebody did the other day? I would call it, perhaps, just the Museum of Conversations, and leave it at that. Then you would read it completely differently, no? You know, I am going to do that with some of the museums! *Museum of Little Ladies* might become Museum of Time. This is my thought this morning.

AS Without changing the museum physically, you will just change the name you give it.

DS Yes. So, the *File Museum* might become My Father's Museum.

AS That will be really interesting because it would upset any kind of typological thinking that people might bring to the way you put

images together in the museums. You don't make the unifying principle of each museum simple and therefore easy to paraphrase. Even with the machines, what unites them is the fact that most of them are machines. But what you foreground with the name you give their museum is a quality or an essence.

DS Exactly. Museum of Strength or Museum of Steel. So, the next question is about the books that I will be making of the Museum Bhavan with Steidl. Should I make them with the new museum titles? We start with Museum of Time, which is Little Ladies, My Father's Museum, which is *File Museum*, Museum of Steel, which is Machines, then Museum of Conversations, which is Furniture, and Photography could become Museum of Sight, or even Light. And then there are the Men, who could become... Museum of Curiosities or Curiosity Museum...

AS Which would suggest both meanings of 'curiosity', like Dickens's *Old Curiosity Shop*.

DS Then, what happens when I take these five images that are on the wall behind you now and I call the sequence... Museum of Touch, or Museum of Caresses? Anyway, *Museum of Chance* remains *Museum of Chance*.

AS And you have the *Museum of Vitrines* and *Museum of Printing Presses*, that are the smaller museums, on the wall.

DS That I will have to think about.

AS Maybe you change the names when the change suggests itself naturally. That shouldn't become a rule either.

DS Now I'm back to the point I started at. If I am a living artist, I have the possibility of doing this. But there is no museum that is going to allow me, half way through the show, to come and change all the

titles, right? There is a major show being planned on the question, when does a work of art end? I would like to say, especially about the *Museum of Chance*, that it ends when I end.

AS It has to be like Life, and Time.

DS Yes. Actually, I don't want to offer the *Museum of Chance* to anybody, and if somebody does acquire it, they have to acquire it with the knowledge that it will keep growing. So, its acquisition will have to be based on a very different kind of contract with the individual or institution. I don't know if this has any precedent, will check.

AS You know that Proust died the day he finished writing *In Search of Lost Time*.

DS [Loud laughter] Really?

AS And he kept revising the proofs, almost until the moment of his death.

DS That's another point I would love to bring into this conversation: the ongoingness of work. I even said that I wanted to change the name of the show to *The Ongoing Museum*. But that involved asking the host museum here, which makes it more difficult.

AS Also, once you install a body of work and start living with it, your consciousness of it keeps changing – as is very apparent in this instant.

DS Precisely, and museum structures don't allow that, gallery structures and art structures don't allow that. So, in a way, I have been forced to make my own structure that allows me to do all of that. It is only when I live inside my work, truly inhabit the work, that it grows organically. Otherwise it becomes a bonsai.

I am half considering adding a bed to the Museum of Chance and possibly sleeping inside it. Well I can certainly do that when Museum Bhavan comes home.

AS So, what you are now saying is that by changing the names of the museums, you are shifting from physically moving the museums around to letting them evolve conceptually while the structures and the pictures remain in the same positions.

DS Exactly. I am actually going to change the name of my part of the show tomorrow. It's going to be called *Ongoing Museum*. Then, I think, what I'm trying to do becomes clearer for people, and for anyone who takes it on. Up to now, it has travelled as *Museum of Chance* or *Museum Bhavan* when its whole. But I don't think any of the museums or institutions understood how serious I am about this inhabitation, and even I didn't understand, till we sat here that day at the opening. It has just been three days, but so much has changed in my head. It's also because of all the conversations going on since then.

AS And conversations do not also always have to be spoken. Someone just has to be around, and a certain kind of thinking begins happening around and into the work.

DS Exactly. This is what I wanted to say to my wonderful wise friend before she left, that it wasn't just her helping physically with the installation that mattered but it was her being part of the support group around me that helped me completely rearrange the concept around this work during installation.

AS So what is it that sustains the ongoingness of the ongoing? It isn't just 'life' in a vague sense, but conversations, people, arrivals, departures, presences, or even absences. I'm leaving soon to catch my flight, which is why there is a concentrated quality about the way we use the little bit of time we have left to talk.

DS Yes, even though you said at the beginning that you don't have the headspace to talk about all this now, and I just wanted to make very short notes as we talked, because very soon someone will come and we will not be able to continue this conversation.

AS And these are not just conceptual principles. They are also the stuff of your work.

DS I could only do this because I am now sitting inside the museum. On its very own furniture. Something about the size and height of this table, the way you have to sit on these stools, that you can't rest your back, that we are slightly shielded from the rest of the world but aware that there might be someone listening... We have to find the right word for it, because I know that there is a performative aspect to all this, but it is not performance. This is not a theatre where I, and others, come and play out pre-determined, semi-fictional actions or exchanges. The spaces created by the museums become chambers in which people move and talk to one another, or to me, in a very real way, out of their engagement with what they are looking at and with what their bodies and minds are being made to do in this space. And this, in turn, activates and animates the work. It is in this sense that I say that I am a living artist actively transforming my work all the time. I don't think I would like to call this activation of my work a 'performance'. It is much more real and spontaneous than that. What we are sitting and doing here now comes directly out of our inhabitation of the work. Isn't it significant that you and I have been unable to have this conversation in my house, among these very museums, which were then in their permanent home. So, what is it about sitting and talking here while the exhibition is going on, and people are coming and going, that produces this specific kind of focused, publicly-private conversation about the work and about its relationship with the world and with life and time? I think it has a great deal to do with the architecture of the furniture, which is integral to the architecture of the museum. Because of the bag on your lap, you are a further away from me

across the table. But if you put your bag on the floor, you will find that to be able to relax, you would have to lean on the table, and then we come into quite an intimate conversation space. So, even if we didn't know each other, we would be able to have this kind of conversation. It's a bit like what happens in a train, no? Except in the train, you can look out the window and ignore the people sitting opposite you.

AS Yes, do you remember that beautiful conversation between Sharmila Tagore and Uttam Kumar in Ray's *Nayak*, sitting across each other in the canteen car exactly as we are sitting now, with the train window between them. She was also interviewing him in that scene, and making notes.

DS Yes! Instead of the window, you have this ongoing museum, and I don't know how young people in their twenties would relate to it, for it is full of references – in a way, I could call it a Museum of References – and there could be parts of the world where they may not get the references... However, I think tonality is beyond that, and if people start to *listen* to the photographs, there might still be a possibility of their making a connection with them.

AS And they don't have to put that connection they make into words, which is fine too, for it may be something elusive.

DS That I leave to you to describe.

AS I believe this quality comes into your work because of the doubleness in it of having, on the one hand, lots of images brought carefully together, but each image having a very particular but ineffable quality to it, which you have to somehow work out for yourself, and then...

DS ...you have to forget it...

AS ...you have to let it go. And while you're working this out for yourself, you might see the sequences of images either horizontally or vertically. This panel, for instance, I find myself always reading vertically. In that vertical sequence the fertility goddess with her legs open comes in the middle, but another sequence begins to form horizontally as well, in which the same goddess comes at the end, as the last image. I have even begun to think of this stone goddess as the Goddess of Chance from between whose legs issue the many forms of life that the work might take, the endless possibilities, as different people bring their different interests and preoccupations to it. I also link with her the obstetrical language that you have been using in your Museum Bhavan statements and other communications in order to describe the 'birthings' of your museums.

DS Well, as I have said many times before, the museums are relations. *File Museum* and *Little Ladies* are sibling museums, and *Furniture* and *Photography* are cousins. That's why they have their own image sizes, so that you can mix the siblings but not the siblings and the cousins. Museums also give birth to other museums. Sometimes these are premature, as the *Museum of Embraces* was at the Hayward when it popped out of the *Museum of Chance*. But, at the same time, *Vitrines* was born out of *Furniture* during the installation, and it is now an independent museum. I cannot rush the process, they have to emerge organically.

The birthing of the museums can also happen through another kind of unfolding of Chance within the architecture of the museums. On the day of the opening, after the museums had been installed, there was a friend who came to visit who has just finished a book on Chandigarh and Le Corbusier, and when he and I were looking at the *Museum of Furniture* together and what came into view as we looked and talked was a new museum within that museum, which we then called the *Chandigarh Chairs*. So, there are seeds, or possibilities, of museums hidden inside the larger museums that come into sudden fruition depending on who I am experiencing the

museums with. But the emergence of the new museum from within what already exists, is not just chance but also has to do with the way I edit the larger museum, always leaving room in them, enough breadth of scope, in spite of the particular character of each, for other threads and associations and themes to emerge, depending on who I am looking at them with. But I may not have any control over the accidents of who drops in when and what that person brings along with him, and what he and I might together touch awake and bring to life that was lying dormant in the work.

AS I am also aware of how frequently you use the language of domesticity to talk about this work. In fact, your museums are a very domestic size.

DS Well, they were originally made to be housed in my apartment and they will be stationed in my apartment between their travels. But also I grew up in a meandering sort of house, where rooms were constantly made out of partitions of cupboards as divisions, or with actual brick and mortar that could be pulled down just as easily. The architecture was not sacrosanct but need-based. It was an organic sort of house... I thrive, like most of us, on conversation, and I'm always wondering about the architecture required for the perfect conversations. I find that when I am enclosed by the insides of two museums, they form a conversation chamber, and it is very important that the museums have their own furniture, which fit inside these shifting chambers.

AS To get back to books being your abiding love, how would you translate this work into a book when you sit down to make it with Steidl?

DS That's quite obvious, since the idea of the museums comes from the book-as-exhibition idea of *Sent a Letter*. The Museum Bhavan book would be 10 books, and the same size as *Sent A Letter*. So, with the Steidl box of Museum Bhavan, you can host Museum Bhavan in your

bedroom, or send it on its own tour to friends in Madrid, or share it among your students. You can also install it alongside *Sent a Letter*. Just imagine, you would then have seventeen miniature exhibitions of my work.

The challenge would be to make a book for *Museum of Chance* and *File Museum*, since they already have books made by Steidl and have been made into limited-edition 'book objects' by me. There is, of course, the possibility of miniaturizing the very books, and that might be quite enough. In fact would make an important comment about size changing the reading. But I also have so many images in the reserve collection of these Museums that I might just try to make a new *Museum of Chance* book. In fact, I will do exactly that, and *File Museum* can become a book with just the images of the Godrej cupboards and not have any images that were in the earlier *File Room* book.

AS I find this way of making the museums proliferate endlessly quite fascinatingly Borgesian – museums producing new museums, museums turning into books, books turning into museums, old books morphing into new books, books that are of the same museum but are different from each other. Perhaps it comes from taking an idea and pushing it to its utmost limits, and wresting from others the freedom to be able to do so...

DS I think it has something to do with being loyal to one's obsessions, being completely focused, not being a butterfly artist, and not letting go. And I am lucky to have a publisher who indulges, and participates in, this obsessiveness. 20.12.2015 New Delhi

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Calcutta, 26.12.2015

AS Could we, please, try and clarify some of the basic ideas about your museums, as many of the readers will not have seen them installed. They will just have the Steidl Museum Bhavan box.

DS That's the reason for making the box – so that people can install Museum Bhavan in their own homes..

AS There was a time, especially in a city like Calcutta, where every home was a museum of sorts, or several kinds of museum somehow thrown together. So, I think I know what you are getting at with the museum.

DS Yes, you can say that your bedside table is your museum. Remember I have been photographing museums for almost two decades now, especially house museums, that are much more flexible in their notions of what museums might be like. I also come from a time when people had **display** cabinets built into their drawing rooms, where a Japanese doll was added after a trip to Japan or an Air India maharaja after the first foreign flight. Though it's the memorial museum that I am drawn to and drawing from. Remember the work with the MGR museum in Madras, which housed the car he drove and his pet lion, Raja. Also, the years I spent photographing individually improvised archives. I am still obsessed with them, and will probably continue to be for the rest of my life. The endless archive.

AS So, if I take you back to Square One and ask again, simply, what is Museum Bhavan?

DS Well to put it simply-Museum Bhavan is a collection of my nine museums actually installed in my home, even though they might inhabit other architectures on their travels. But it is when they travel

all together that they form the Museum Bhavan; singly, they are separate museums.

AS And in what sense are they museums?

DS They are a collection of objects that are housed in a structure, which have a display section and a reserve collection. Each will have its own catalogue. So, does that not make it a museum? They will even have a curator , registrar and trustees, not to forget the museum gift shop. I suppose you could have initially called them giant books but now that they have their storage units built into them, they are museums. I am talking about the museum as an artistic form. Ofcourse taking artistic licenses here. The structures open and close in different ways, they can join to form a chamber or labyrinth. I can change the images very easily and dip into the immense reserve collection in a minute. The museums also have smaller museums that can be displayed on the walls, while you store away the larger structures if space or mood demands. But you can never, never put a single image on the wall because the images are not glazed! [smiles with glee] You see, I have always seen my work in contact sheets of 12 or 36 images – contact sheets that I can read horizontally, vertically, diagonally, with the image changing, depending on its context. A contact sheet might start in Kyoto and end in Varanasi. It was an art world thing to present an image as a single image, and I could go along with it while I made silver prints. But now that I make digital prints from scanning my negatives, I am somehow more free with my images and their associations. I know people have a problem reading so many images and might prefer being spoon-fed one image at a time. But I just can't do that. Come visit Museum bhavan as many times as you like.

AS And what is your vision of the future of Museum Bhavan?

DS The Museums will be housed in my apartment in Delhi. They will be made available to visitors by appointment only. They will possibly be

open to the public on the first full moon of each year, or the second. I will be the registrar/curator and give guided tours as and when I am in Delhi. You are very welcome to conduct interviews or classes on poetry in the space of Museum Bhavan. In time, we might have an archivist-in-residence programme, and possibly seminars on the nano museum with Hans Ulrich Obrist.

AS Do you see Museum Bhavan as a family that always stays together? Or will the members disperse?

DS Well they will always be together in Museum Bhavan, but can certainly travel independently. The edits have been made such that the curator can install the images in any grouping. In fact, the longest time is spent on working out the edit of a group of images that can work in any combination. I would, of course, prefer that siblings travel together but it maybe time to let go of that idea too. There might even come a time when I ask other people to send in images, say on Instagram, where I have a Museums of Legs hashtag, and that might become a virtual museum to which people can send in entries. That could be the beginnings of yet another form.

AS What could be the next few museums?

DS It does not happen like that. It's not that I can say, OK now let's make a Museum of Bottles. The museum has to present itself from within my work. So neither I nor you as the 'collector' can make a museum to order. Meaning, you or I cannot commission the museum. That just does not ring true. The moment I start to make a photo because it will fit in a certain museum, I can immediately hear the off-note in it. I have to sit with my contact sheets, and over time, slowly, the museum presents itself, I build it, but it still may not work....i think I work backwards. I collect images over months and years and then at a certain time I stop and start to look at this raw material and weed out till the bare structure remains. Then I find the form, rather it finds itself in this editing process. I am now working

towards a Museum of Quiet and it may have a completely different form from any of these museums. I may house it in a bed form, since sleeping in the Museums is so alluring.

AS I was thinking about you as the museum guide, and it occurred to me that artists install their work in a gallery or museum and leave. So, the absence of the artist is what defines the visitor's experience of the work. But in your case it is essential that you remain with the work for most of the time and guide the visitor through it, and your conversations with them become part of the ongoing life of the work.

DS Well, I think of myself as a living artist and the work ends when I end, as I said to you before. So these two kinds of life have to remain joined together. I think its too early to be fossilized because the institutions have a certain structure. It's an interesting question, when a work of art ends. I am very pleased that I have made a form that need never end, that I can keep adding chapters to the museums, or produce other museums, and make a large joint family of Museum Bhavan.