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## **The Otolith Group: *A Lost Future***

*SEPT 2018*

*By Swagato Chakravorty*



The Otolith Group, *Santiniketan Studies (A Century Before Us II): Tapovan Study Circle*, 2018. Digital collage on Somerset Museum Rag paper, 13 1/2 x 20 inches. Courtesy the artists.

New York

### **The Rubin Museum**

June 1 – September 17, 2018

*A Lost Future*, at the Rubin Museum of Art, is a tripartite exhibition that forms part of the museum's year-long exploration of "the future." Curated by Beth Citron, the Rubin's curator of modern and contemporary art, the show opened on February 23 and runs through January 28, 2019. Its first phase, *A Lost Future: Shezad Dawood* (Feb. 23 – May 21), foregrounded the work of Dawood (b. 1974, London). The current chapter, which runs through September 17 and is the subject of this review, focuses on the Otolith Group (a collaborative project founded in 2002 between Anjalika Sagar, b. 1968 and Kodwo Eshun, b. 1967, both based in London). The final part will feature Matti Braun (b. 1968, Berlin). Work by all three artists is displayed throughout the show, although the Rubin's central cove focuses more particularly on individual artists based on when you happen to visit (right now, therefore, the space is given over to The Otolith Group).

Founded in 2002, the Otolith Group comprises Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun, who operate at once as artists, theorists, and curators. In the *Otolith Trilogy* (2003 – 09) the Group mingled science fiction, archival footage, live-action imagery, and narrative voiceovers to advance the notion of what they term "past potential futures." The group's work has primarily focused on India's history of (ultimately frustrated) socialist and collectivist aspirations in the wake of the nation's emergence from British colonial rule in 1947; her role in forging the Non-Aligned Movement which, from 1961 through the end of the Cold War, allowed a small number of nations to navigate a political pathway unaffiliated with either Western or Eastern blocs; and the revolutionary feminist and postcolonial actions that galvanized national sentiment for a few brief decades.

*Otolith I* (2003), for instance, follows a distant (fictional) descendant of Anjalika Sagar as she mines what appears to be an extensive archive of historical images through the journal of her ancestor. From imagery of protests leading up to the US-led invasion of Iraq, to a lengthy section on the actual crossing of paths, in 1973, between Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova (the first woman to travel to outer space) and Anasuya Gyan-Chand (Sagar's grandmother, then-president of the leftist National Federation of Indian Women), the film works through failed political insurgencies and moments of latent potentiality, seeing them as still-alive, still vibrating with energy.



The Otolith Group, *O Horizon* (still), 2018. 4K video, color, 81 min. 10 sec. Commissioned by bauhaus imaginista and co-produced with the Rubin Museum, with kind support from Project 88.

At the heart of the Otolith Group's practice is a commitment to reconstructive historiography, a practice not dissimilar to the materialist historicism championed by Walter Benjamin. Their work envisions alternate futures: futures that once could have been, but which were denied. Refusing to traverse linear history, the Group aims at destabilizing historical narratives by reconfiguring them through the powers of fiction, ultimately attempting to posit futures that may yet come to pass. In this sense they share much with Walid Raad and the Atlas Group's creative output. And, as T.J. Demos has pointed out, the work of contemporary experimental documentary artists like the Otolith Group or the Atlas Group owes much to forebears such as the Black Audio Film Collective, Harun Farocki, and Chris Marker. In short, the Otolith Group both extends and revitalizes a rich strand of hybrid moving-image practice that combines urgent questions of political subjectivity with formal experimentation, primarily by centering archival material throughout their work.

Both *Otolith II* (2007) and *III* (2009) are variations on the Group's preoccupation with fictionalizing history in order to open it up to speculative and imaginative interventions. Where *Otolith II* explores the frustrated ambitions of architectural modernism in Nehruvian India—with particular emphasis on Le Corbusier's Chandigarh—its sequel turns time backward. In other words, rather than projecting forward into imagined futures, the Group takes up the Bengali filmmaker Satyajit Ray's unrealized science-fiction film *The Alien* (widely considered to have directly informed Steven Spielberg's 1982 film *E.T.*) in order to launch an exploration of late-60s visual culture that leads into an unexpected survey of contemporary anxieties over "illegal" aliens, citizenship, nationhood, and borders.

The Rubin's show is structured around the Otolith Group's newest moving-image work, *O Horizon* (2018), situating it amidst archival ephemera. Throughout the show's run, the museum also screens the *Otolith Trilogy* on select dates. Toward the beginning of *O Horizon*, words from Rabindranath Tagore's poem, "The Year 1400," echo around the darkened chamber: "Today, in a hundred years . . ." The English translation from Tagore's native Bengali doesn't quite grasp the way his words play with temporality. Tagore's poem (Bengali title, "1400 Saal") indeed begins by imagining a future date, exactly a century from the time of his writing. But the Bengali words begin from a position of insistent presentness, jump one hundred years, and then return to the authorial moment to ask, in the following sentence, "who it is that now (then) reads these words." And, of course, the title's allusion to a historical moment that was already in the distant past even when Tagore wrote the poem compounds the temporal play. It is a recursive movement that, in its entanglement of history and memory, accentuates the historiographic interventions that structure the work of the Otolith Group both in this film and their previous films.

In 1896, Tagore, by then already famed as a polymath who had begun to make his influence felt across the fields of Bengali literature, music, and early Indian modern art; and who was an avowed humanist and cosmopolitan modernist (*avant la lettre*, but certainly in the senses outlined by art historian Kobena Mercer and, previously, by James Clifford), composed "The Year 1400." In 1913, he would become the first non-European to receive the Nobel Prize in literature.



The Otolith Group, *Otolith II* (still); 2007. HD video with sound, 47 min. 42 sec. Courtesy The Otolith Group and LUX, London.

Between 1901 and 1932, Tagore realized his vision of a genuinely humanist pedagogy in Santiniketan, an experimental academic-residential commune situated a couple of hours from Calcutta. Strategically located within reach of, but removed from the bustle of (colonial) modernity that was swiftly spreading throughout the city--then still the British capital of India--Santiniketan provided a space for Tagore to gather together a

growing constellation of students, intellectuals, and critics who wished to erect an anti-Taylorist, anti-Fordist model of education capable of more fluidly moving between theory and praxis, nature and nurture, the human and the eco-critical. It's not inaccurate to trace in Santiniketan certain ambitions that would later, in the West, be realized within the Bauhaus ethos.<sup>1</sup>

At the Rubin, the Otolith Group's characteristic strategy of reconstructive historiography built around archival work, displayed not just in *O Horizon*, but also in the exhibition's inclusion of a small reference library as well as numerous digital composites integrating present-day Santiniketan with historical details, interweave modernity with colonial power, humanism with posthumanism, and industrialized models of education with alternative possibilities constructed around other criteria. The reference library, to which all three artists involved in *A Lost Future* contributed, includes in its Otolith Group section titles by Tagore (*Gora*, *The Gardener*, *Red Oleanders*), Ray (*The Complete Adventures of Feluda, Vol. I*), but also numerous works by Octavia E. Butler, the famed African-American writer of science-fiction (*The Xenogenesis Trilogy* (also known as *Lilith's Brood*), *Wild Seed*). Taken together, they offer reference points that situate the artists' work within frameworks both of history and of the human imagination.

Walking down the gallery, one also finds a number of digital composite photographs developed by the Otolith Group. In scene after scene, Santiniketan as it exists and operates today, still honoring the Tagorean ethos, variously bleeds into, merges with, or stands in contrast to what it was roughly a hundred years ago. Photo-manipulation here connects past with present to reawaken latent possibilities. Indeed, for a project that clearly aligns itself against, or at least sets up a critical relation to, our techno-evangelical present by invoking a lost vision of life lived in dialogue with nature, neither *O Horizon* nor its photographic accompaniment evince any technophobia. There is no longing for some mythical prelapsarian, pre-technologized modernity, as footage of Santiniketan repeatedly shows the use of current technology such as iPhones in the service of humanist pedagogy. Likewise, the photographs do not advertise nostalgia, but rather ask the viewer to see the past as ever present--if not always fully alive.

Much like the Tagorean wordplay that inaugurates "The Year 1400," the displaced temporality of which neatly characterizes the operations of the Otolith Group, the title "O Horizon" sets up a similar play of meaning. *Horizon* can, after the spectator has seen so much footage of Santiniketan, with its abundant soil and greenery, evoke the simple earth itself. One of the meanings of the word is, of course, the organic soil layer that lies above subsoil and bedrock. In this sense, the horizon in question becomes a site of renewal: Santiniketan today continues the Tagorean mission, and continues to promote a vision of education and life lived in the midst of nature, even as technological interventions and modernity's global reach have reconfigured the terms of that communion. But in another sense, *horizon* refers to the limits of perception--both literally and figuratively. The horizon, the line at which the sky appears to meet the surface of the earth, is thereby also the limit of visual perception. Figuratively, the horizon represents the limit of human perception and knowledge. Hailing the horizon in multiple senses, then, *O Horizon* is more than just a paean to unrealized ambitions; it both acknowledges the limits of perception and invokes alternate frameworks of grasping the world and its potential futures.

## Notes

1. In a recent interview, the Sagar and Eshun affirmed these affinities, noting that Tagore's project "... offered a means to realize what Partha Mitter calls Tagore's 'environmental primitivism', which in many ways paralleled that of Johannes Itten's and Wassily Kandinsky's concerns with spiritual expression at the Bauhaus." See "The Otolith Group talks about *O Horizon*, 2018," *Artforum* July 24, 2018. <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/the-otolith-group-talks-about-o-horizon-2018-76090>.

## Contributor

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Swagato Chakravorty is a Ph.D. candidate in History of Art, combined with Film and Media Studies, at Yale University. His research explores moving-image art and expanded cinema since 1989, focusing on the work of artists from the global South that intersect with documentary, archival, and performance-based practices. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.