

From The Fuchsia Tree, January 2012

I am on my way to the KHOJ studios in Khirkee village. Huddled in a corner amid the meager mid- afternoon crowd on the ladies compartment of the metro, I stand, trying to balance myself against the motion of the train. It's a safe haven, this place, away from the thronging din of the compartments that follow and if you are attentive you can sense the relief of your co-passengers in the air. Intellectually, I can't be sure how I feel about the exclusivity this section of the train offers. Somehow I never warmed to the idea of reserving a certain space specifically for a section of the populace. How ought one to receive a seat set aside for her particularly because her body is seen as a site of weakness, replete with infinite possibilities to violate it? Is it up to the metro authority (or any authority for that matter) to classify my being as worthy of exclusive attention explicitly on the basis of my gender? Can such a distinctive method of segregation, thinly disguised as a means of 'protection', of ensuring 'safety' possibly be acceptable, despite the politically questionable nature of its preliminary premise?

Many who travel by the metro in Delhi everyday would refute these arguments with fairly simple arguments of their own; they would say that the ladies compartment is convenient, that it allows you the freedom to travel unmindful of your body, cleansed free of the tension that you must otherwise be taut with as you remain watchful of every glance that hovers over you, every touch, every word, every accidental breath. And I would agree, of course. Our right to be, to just exist, free of the constant persistent responsibility that the female body is made to demand, must be seized, in any manner possible, even if in the form of a tiny train compartment. Unfortunately though, the ladies compartment is not the extent of the world we live in. And the fight to persist under the burden of all that being a woman is assumed to entail must be continued with relentless vigor off the boundaries of this very brief, somewhat deceptive, stopover. As I step into the display area of the exhibition, I have come to see I find my recent musings on the train being harked back unexpectedly. London based fine art photographer Ottavia Castellina embarked upon her photographic series (L)ending lines, with the simple decision to commute daily on the women-only compartment of the Delhi Metro and the Ladies' special local trains in Mumbai. The Ladies' special trains (as these have come to be christened) were launched as a safety measure for working women who often battled with various forms of sexual harassment and violence on their way to and from work. By travelling amidst these women everyday, Castellina hoped to maintain an experimental travelogue, which would allow her to chronicle, both imagistically and through text, the alternative sociality that these exclusive compartments encouraged amongst female passengers.

(L)ending lines is presented in keeping with the format it was conceived (and perhaps executed) in as a row of Moleskine diaries, all displaying a single entry on a specific date. Each entry consisted of an image and an accompanying line of text, which ranged from banal observations to abbreviated details of an amusing exchange with a co-passenger. Every Moleskine appeared self-contained and yet strung together they seemed effortlessly connected. A sound file, looped endlessly, filled the tiny room it was displayed in with the cadenced clamor of a train compartment. Castellina's work allows an infinite number of points to plunge into a discussion, but in steady pursuit of the

jumbled ball of thought that appears gradually to have unraveled into this piece lets us focus purposely on one of the key ideas central to this series, i.e. Exclusivity. At one level this exclusivity maybe translated as the obvious restrictions imposed by gender-defined spaces such as the Ladies compartments, as I related above. But at yet another level, it is reflected through Castellina's non-Indian (Italian) origin, which makes her experience at these sites specific and perhaps even unique, granting her, as it does, the vantage of the outsider, tourist gaze. It is, thus, telling that the camera, that time honoured implement for effectively situating and finally substantiating such a gaze, is also Castellina's weapon of choice.

Not surprisingly, photography serves a number of functions in this particular work. For starters, it allows her to efficiently locate herself amid the social experience of the train compartments: this is crucial since her identity as a tourist puts her at a fundamental distance from her immediate surroundings. However, photography has been 'bridging' such cultural fissures with veritable ease since the proliferation of camera ownership. Having an experience today has essentially come to be the same as taking a photograph of it. From birthdays to weddings to graduation ceremonies to everyday gatherings at the local coffee shop, every experience today exists to finally end up in a photograph. To 'capture' in today's shutter happy world is to participate in an experience or event. This line of argument intensifies substantially when extended to tourist photography. Since travel aligns naturally with gazing, a camera provides it a rational ally. Photographs allow tourists the chance to not just see and make sense of the places they have visited, retrospectively, but also assert their presence there through evidentiary proof. The technology of the camera and films have critically redefined the very nature of travel and converted 'sites' into 'sights'.

This easy conversion of 'location' into 'vision' is grafted with its very own fiction, often (but not necessarily) different from the dominant mythology built around a certain space. Castellina's (L)ending lines easily escapes the noose of the stereotypical travel photographs simply because she somehow subsumes within its frames the performative aspects of her art. Her photographs frequently display a frozen moment of sociality that establishes her presence in the frame despite her evident absence from the actual picture. The text, which appears deceptively to have a token presence meant only to enhance the external format of the work, not only fits into the series but also instills in it a sense of mobility critical to the work. Anecdotes describing comments directed at her further flesh out the cultural rift and her 'other'ness in the situation in a more palpable manner (one of them quotes a woman who tells her "Your husband must be loving you because you have fair skin").

It is at this point that a new door thrusts open into my initial understanding of the space of the ladies compartment. In my haste to view it as a fleeting, transitory passage I had missed the obvious possibility of it proving to be an alternative (even if brief) site of sociability. The space of the ladies compartment due to its inherent mobile nature never ceased to be connected to the world I appeared to have imagined to be beyond it. Its boundaries therefore did not sterilize the passengers of the identities they maintained outside nor did it manage to ward off the many tribulations they fought daily to cope up with these. What it did provide was a space to share these, if only implicitly, with other

women who struggled similarly with similar things. This understanding allowed the passengers the rare chance to interact with each other, in terms often difficult to construe outside the periphery of the same sex compartment. For it was only here that many of them could dare to be audacious in ways they were trained not to be in the presence of the opposite sex.

One of the most exhilarating photographs in the series shows a giggling young woman raise up her own camera phone to boldly capture the artist photographing her. It is the point at which her feeble flash bleeds into Castellina's frame that the photograph takes a leap for the profound. This liminal space defined by the lady's cheeky defiance and the gaze which she boldly reverts back to the artist is the high point of this series. This single shot infuses into it the exultant gasp of a happening. In a moment Castellina effectively sweeps clean your real and imagined perceptions of the sites she breezily captures in her frames and creates instead a new reality, a geography that combines with the very unusual spatial dynamics of the ladies compartment and creates her very own fiction. It is this fictive element that finally clutches onto your own imagination and takes multifarious shapes as I walk back. Later, almost unknowingly, I stumble upon its firm fingerprint on a blank white corner of my mind.

Parni Ray