

Address on the occasion of the (virtual) opening of the 'KOLKATA BLACK & WHITE. DREAMS, VOICES, IMAGES' exhibition in the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2020

Dear ladies and gentlemen

Dear friends of the museum

A strange silence has descended with the measures to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus over Zurich, over Switzerland, over many regions in the world, thus also over India, over Kolkata. Not a restful silence though, rather a standstill.

The same silence has also fallen over our Ethnographic Museum, which is currently closed to the public. For those who continue to work there whilst keeping a social distance, they are walking quietly, listening to their own footsteps, surrounded by the unusually silent Old Botanical Garden in its spring dress.

In social anthropology we know a research field which may further elucidate for us this time of stillness: the '*anthropologie du silence*', the anthropology of silence, of quietness, of keeping silent, of noiselessness, of soundlessness, of silencing, of quieting down. In this anthropology of silence, David Le Breton holds that a 'zero quality of sound', an absolute soundlessness, can only be created artificially, technically. Any other silence contains noises somewhere, for something is always living, which can only be recognized if a human is capable of becoming aware of it. With his research, the French anthropologist has provided an interpretation of socially-produced and readable silence between nature and technical modernity.

Yet if, following David Le Breton, one takes a silent environment of a kind of 'zero quality of sound' as the idea of a culturally recordable space, the images and sounds within it may be understood as concentrated signatures which make a particular place unique.

Thomas Kaiser and Samuel Schütz have traced such image and sound signatures in one living quarter in south Kolkata. In their exhibition 'KOLKATA BLACK & WHITE. DREAMS, VOICES, IMAGES' they exhibit shades of the sound signature of that particular place audibly and visibly. To do this they start from the moment of nightly silence which regularly envelops the metropolis, as if it were a village. Kolkata becomes visible and audible as a sound space familiar to its inhabitants in which they skilfully orient themselves day by day: through acting and moving in it, in perceiving, in feeling, in the interconnectedness of humans, animals, modern technology, the elements, the seasons, the deities.

Since the 1990s these two Swiss artists have visited Kolkata again and again. 'How may they be doing' Thomas Kaiser these days worried about their contemporaries in Kolkata during a conversation. The inhabitants of the living quarter cared for both of them while they documented the sounds, the shades of light and movements. They may have wondered, remaining politely reserved, about their recording such self-evident everyday sounds and about their camera obscura photographs, developed nightly in a hotel room. Some interlocutors disclosed to both of them their nightly dreams, their songs, reminiscences from their lives.

Thomas Kaiser and Samuel Schütz were ultimately in India in search of the 'social sculpture', the 'studio that happens between people' proposed by Joseph Beuys. In Kolkata people allowed them into their everyday lives again and again, sharing with them over many years. The intensity of this experiencing eventually made them – Samuel Schütz as the photographer and draftsman, Thomas Kaiser as the sound documentarist – reverse their gaze to ask: what could Kolkata and its inhabitants reveal to Europe as lived pieces of art? Thus, a project of finding changed into one of carefully

approaching, through the media of sound and image. The project shifted into the documentation of a soundscape between humans on site in a living quarter in Kolkata.

The moment of this opening ceremony of the exhibition 'KOLKATA BLACK & WHITE' – who could have anticipated this – takes place just as the Indian metropolis has shut down. Her sound signature is currently equally changing. The silence in Zurich is close to the silence in Kolkata. This unwonted silence merges with the sounds of disrupted orderliness and pulsing of the everyday, here as there. The Kali temple in south Kolkata is just as abandoned as St. Jacob's Church in Zurich's district 4. Nature alone continues, spring finds its way through sights, aromas and sounds, a few cars cutting through the silence.

By making the sound signature of a living quarter in Kolkata experienceable in a small exhibition room in Zurich, the curators – especially Thomas Kaiser, as sound archiver of our museum – are pursuing a particular concern. For them this is about showing the attention – in particular in the current *Sattelzeit* of the analogous and the digital – which sounds as cultural artefacts deserve, in the museum and beyond. Knowledge, competences, history, corporeality, emotionality and appreciation, context, orientation and agency, all of this is transmitted everywhere through sounds and may be experienced through sounds. Thus, as long as the sound of an object is missing from an exhibition, the artefacts as well as their originators and main commentators remain silent, unheard.

This exhibition should be understood as a plea: that in future the voices and the timbral appreciations of the originators of the collections we look after should always be built in. It makes us painfully aware of how patchy ethnographic collections still are today, with regard to sound and voices. The exhibition – like the earlier exhibition 'Listening on the steep slope' by Rebekka Sutter and Thomas Kaiser – generates an echo chamber. Inside this echo chamber each person relocates themselves, according to their own sound socialization. And currently it is furthermore mirrored against the said grand silence in the world.

In view of the temporary closure of the museum, from tomorrow onwards we will offer you the possibility to explore the exhibition virtually through a 360° online documentation. The exhibition catalogue already lies ready, awaiting what will come.

I thank the curators Thomas Kaiser and Samuel Schütz, furthermore Frank Weinmann and Dominik Steinmann of the university exhibition service, designer Dana Pedemonte, media designer Klaus Powroznik and his colleagues, as well as the staff of the Ethnographic Museum warmly, for having finalized and documented the exhibition under the conditions which are challenging us all nowadays. I especially thank you, the friends of the museum, who have found your way to this virtual exhibition of 'KOLKATA BLACK & WHITE. DREAMS, VOICES, IMAGES'. Please get through this time of prescribed silence in good health, a silence which will eventually be breached and give way to new sound signatures between humans. You will also be able to experience in real life the exhibition space of the exhibition 'KOLKATA BLACK & WHITE' for the first time, the moment that our museum is reopened.

First and foremost, until then take care of yourself and your loved ones!

Yours sincerely

Mareile Flitsch