

BURNING
AGAINST
THE DYING
OF THE
LIGHT

an exhibition of works by
RITU SARIN & TENZING SONAM

10 - 31 December 2015

Khoj Studios

We have been making films together for three decades, telling stories about people our lives have intersected with and investigating issues that touch us directly. We are primarily documentary filmmakers but have made a number of video installations and one dramatic feature.

Over the years, we have formed long and meaningful relationships with many of our protagonists. These relationships often predate the filmmaking encounter – in fact, they are often its inspiration – and they continue past the bounded temporality of the particular film. In this way, each of our films continues to have an ongoing connection to us and it is this conflation of our own lived experience and its creative extension and expression that we constantly strive to achieve. Indeed, our everyday interpersonal relations and our engagement with the larger world are as important to us as our work.

A recurring subject in our work is the issue of Tibet, with which we have been intimately involved in a number of different ways: personally, politically and artistically. Through our films, we have attempted to document, question and reflect on the questions of exile, identity, culture and nationalism that confront the Tibetan people.

Another concern is the transformation of traditional societies as they adapt to the inroads of globalisation. Having lived and worked in different countries and places over the past few decades, we have experienced some of these dramatic economic, social, and cultural changes taking place, both intimately as insiders and from a wider perspective, shaped by the accumulation of these varied experiences. Living now, off and on, for the past twenty years in rural Dharamshala, we have been observing and occasionally recording how this little corner of India is changing.

This exhibition is the first time several of our video installations and documentaries have been presented in one venue and under a broad thematic rubric. It comprises a selection of works that investigates both Tibet's ongoing political struggle and the transformations that we see in the Himalayan region we live in, wrought by deliberate colonial policies, the impact of globalisation, or a combination of the two.

The title of the exhibition – *Burning Against the Dying of the Light* – refers to a newly produced, pivotal work within this exhibition. The multi-media installation examines and contextualizes the politics of protest in Tibet, especially in their latest primary manifestation, self-immolations.

Ritu & Tenzing
December 2015

Since February 2009, 142 Tibetans have self-immolated in Tibet. Of these, 120 are known to have died. In exile – in India and Nepal – seven Tibetans have self-immolated since 1998, four of who succumbed to their injuries.

In 2008, nearly five decades after the fall of Tibet to Communist Chinese forces in 1959, widespread protests against Chinese rule erupted across the Tibetan plateau. This was the year of the Beijing Olympics and China was quick to brutally quell the uprising. Since then, the region has been under virtual lockdown. Hundreds of Tibetans were arrested for their role in the unrest and scores of writers, musicians and intellectuals were subsequently incarcerated for giving voice to the aspirations of their people. All forms of protest were methodically and violently shut down. Repressive measures were put into place controlling the practice of religion and restricting the freedom of movement within the Tibetan plateau.

Tibetans in Tibet today live in a carefully cultivated climate of fear and suspicion enforced by the heavy presence of armed security forces patrolling the streets and a ubiquitous surveillance system. A network of spies and informers keeps the population under tight control and makes any kind of public protest impossible. Since 2008, the outside world and the international press have had very limited access to the region further isolating it from the attention of the world. It is in this context that the wave of self-immolations emerged, both as the only form of protest available to Tibetans and as a manifestation of their continuing determination to challenge Chinese rule. The majority of the self-immolators have called for freedom in Tibet – some explicitly demanding independence – and the return of their leader, the Dalai Lama, to his homeland.

Since the self-immolations reached their highest intensity in 2012 when nearly 100 Tibetans set themselves alight, Chinese authorities have launched a determined campaign to halt this newest challenge to its rule. They have criminalised self-immolations and made anyone found to be aiding or abetting a self-immolator guilty of culpable homicide. Scores of Tibetans have been arrested to date, and some given extended prison terms for their association with a self-immolator. It is common to see security patrols marching through the streets of Tibet with fire extinguishers as part of their arsenal of weapons. As a result, the numbers of self-immolators have drastically reduced but not died out entirely. The latest incident took place on 27 August 2015.

The Vietnamese monk Thich Quang Due's iconic self-immolation on the streets of Saigon in 1963 may have been the first recorded instance of this particular form of political protest. His compatriot, the well-known Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh wrote:

“The Vietnamese monk, by burning himself, says with all his strength and determination that he can endure the greatest of suffering to protect his people. What he really aims at is the expression of his will and determination, not death. To express will by burning oneself, therefore, is not to commit an act of destruction but to perform an act of construction, that is to suffer and to die for the sake of one's people.”

The actions of the self-immolators in Tibet are similarly seen to be taking place in the service of a noble goal, fully congruent with the Buddhist ideal of sacrificing oneself for a larger goal that benefits many. Here, self-immolation becomes the only action available to protest and draw attention to the increasingly intolerable situation in Tibet, one where all other avenues of peaceful protest have been shut down by an unrelenting and ruthless colonial power. Burning the self is transformed into political action.

“This is the twenty-first century, and this is the year in which so many Tibetan heroes have died. I am sacrificing my body both to stand in solidarity with them in flesh and blood, and to seek repentance through this highest tantric honour of offering one's body. This is not to seek personal fame or glory. I am giving away my body as an offering of light to chase away the darkness, to free all beings from suffering....”

From the final testimony of Lama Soepa, a respected teacher and monk and one of the Tibetan self-immolators.

BURNING AGAINST THE DYING OF THE LIGHT

is a multi part installation consisting of the following works:

The Wheel of Light and Darkness
Nets in the Sky, Traps on the Ground
Funeral #1
Funeral #2
Two Friends
Last Words
Memorial
Build a New Socialist Countryside



BURNING AGAINST THE DYING OF THE LIGHT

Multi-Media Installation (work in progress)

2015

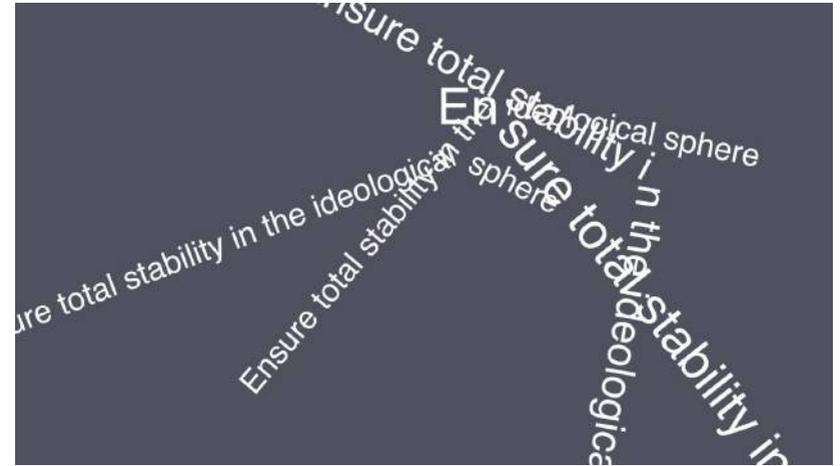
The title of the installation reflects on Dylan Thomas' poem, Do not go gentle into that good night, with its refrain "Rage, rage against the dying of the light." While Dylan Thomas' poem was an exhortation to his dying father not to die without a fight, this work examines the self-immolation protests in Tibet as part of a continuing struggle to prevent the light of an entire civilization from dying out.

A number of these fiery protests have been captured on mobile phones and secretly made available to the outside world. This act itself is punishable by long prison sentences. These hurriedly shot videos, filmed at great risk by ordinary people, are the only evidence we have of these events, and bring home in graphic and horrific detail the physical reality of self-immolations. To witness a living human body engulfed in flames is a truly distressing and disturbing sight. But what right do we have to turn away our faces when the very point of such a public protest is to draw our attention to the cause they represent?

The Wheel of Light and Darkness

Mixed-Media Video Installation

This installation is built around a large rotating Buddhist prayer wheel. But unlike a typical Buddhist prayer wheel, it consists of its bare armature, ringed by metal bars. Sheets of religious text lie exposed at its heart. Embedded in a circle around its skeletal circumference is a number of tablets, each screen playing videos of the self-immolations as they were originally filmed. This prayer wheel is both a tribute to the courage of the activists and a grim reminder of the cause they died for – the slow disappearance of the very essence of their identity and culture. As in a traditional prayer wheel, each revolution of the wheel strikes a tiny bell, its sharp ring dispelling ignorance and sending out a message of hope and peace.



Nets in the Sky, Traps on the Ground

Multimedia: graphic animation, printed material

A series of Orwellian phrases from official Chinese documents describing some of the many control mechanisms and restrictive measures that Tibetans live under are projected. Text from official documents outlining these policies are displayed on the walls. These present a more comprehensive picture of the draconian laws that Tibetans live under, which don't exist anywhere else in China.



Funeral #1

Single-channel video

9:03

This video follows the self-immolation and cremation of Ani Palden Choetso, a Buddhist nun who burnt herself on 13 November 2011 on a street corner in Tawu town in Eastern Tibet. Video footage subsequently smuggled out of Tibet shows her standing stock still, engulfed in flames, before collapsing. Later, a crowd gathers and prevents security officials from taking her body away. Her funeral is held at the local monastery where thousands chant prayers and hold a sombre candlelight vigil. Two days later, a hurriedly filmed mobile phone video shows the monastery under attack by armed forces. After this event, the authorities cracked down on performing funeral ceremonies for self-immolators.



Funeral #2

Single-channel video

6:51

This video follows the self-immolation and cremation of Jamphel Yeshe who set himself alight during a peaceful demonstration in the heart of the Indian capital, New Delhi, on 26 March 2012. He died in hospital two days later. His death had the effect of galvanising the exile Tibetan community and elevating him to the status of a hero. The video starts with footage of Jamphel Yeshe in the crowd of demonstrators minutes before he set himself alight. It is followed by images of his self-immolation and footage of his funeral procession and cremation in Dharamshala, witnessed by hundreds of distraught Tibetans.

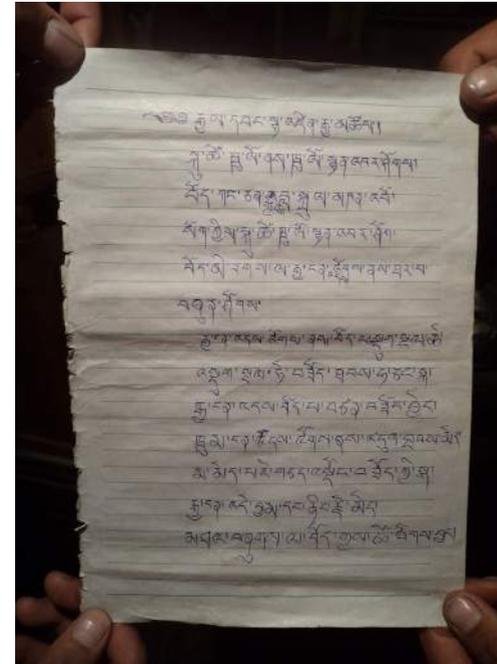


Two Friends

Single-channel video

5:49

Two friends, Ngawang Norphel, 22, and Tenzin Khedup, 24, both former monks, took a vow to die together. On 20 June 2012, carrying the banned Tibetan national flag and shouting independence slogans, they set themselves on fire on a busy street in Trindu town in Eastern Tibet. Mobile phone footage captures their dramatic sacrifice. While Tenzin Khedup died on the spot, Ngawang Norphel was carried by monks to the local monastery. He died more than a month later in a Chinese hospital. While in the monastery, burnt beyond recognition, he talked on camera to the monks attending to him. This exchange – as he laments the situation in Tibet that led him to take this extreme action and asks after the welfare of his friend – poignantly conveys the urgency and desperation of how people in Tibet perceive their situation.



Last words

Printed material

Some of the final messages left behind by the self-immolators are displayed. These statements, sometimes matter-of-fact, often poetic and deeply philosophical, explain their reasons for deciding to burn themselves. In their mix of Buddhist compassion and political awareness, they provide a compelling insight into the unique nature of the Tibetan self-immolations.



Memorial

Mixed-media installation: video and photographs

A gallery of 149 framed portraits of every self-immolator – blank squares standing in where photos are missing – are mounted on a wall in rows. A video loop of the self-immolator Jamphel Yeshe's simple sleeping area in his rented room in Majnu ka Tila, the Tibetan refugee settlement in Delhi, exactly as he left it on the morning of his self-immolation plays on an adjacent wall. A small lamp burns, an offering of light and a symbol of the sacrifice of the self-immolators. Viewers can offer a *khata*, the traditional Tibetan offering scarf, in memory of the self-immolators or as a tribute. *Khatas* are used by Tibetans to mark all occasions, happy or sad, sacred or profane.



Build a New Socialist Countryside

Photographs

Since 2006, the “Build a New Socialist Countryside” programme, targeted specifically at Tibetan areas, has “reoused” over two million Tibetans in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of nomadic herders in the eastern part of the Tibetan plateau have been relocated or settled in “New Socialist Villages”, drab rows of soul-destroying, concrete housing. These policies, which Tibetans cannot challenge, are radically altering their way of life. Before-and-after satellite images graphically demonstrate the extent of social engineering taking place.

2013 DigitalGlobe, Source: Google Earth



TAKING TIGER MOUNTAIN BY STORM

Single-channel video installation

7:25 | 2015

Recently acquired Chinese police footage of a large-scale raid on a small village in Central Tibet is redeployed, converting it from a security apparatus archival record to a parody of what Communism means today in Tibet, and by extension, in China. Hundreds of armed police, paramilitary forces, attack dogs and armoured vehicles launch a dawn raid on a sleeping village and make house to house search-and-arrests of suspected Tibetan nationalists, rudely awakening terrified men, women and boys. Accompanied by a stirring rendition of *The East is Red*, the video is edited like a scene from a war movie. Intercut by propaganda text from the well-known Communist Chinese opera, *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, one of the eight officially approved plays during the Cultural Revolution.



MIDDLE WAY OR INDEPENDENCE?

Multi-channel video installation

2008

This multi-channel video installation unfolds around a spirited debate by a group of Tibetan monks on the best way to resolve the Tibetan question, pitting the Middle Way Approach of partial autonomy within China against the demand for total independence. It was filmed at a remote campsite in Uttarakhand in 2008, during a three-month Peace March to Tibet from Dharamshala undertaken by a group of Tibetan activists, mostly monks. Animated and impassioned, this discussion recalls similar debates in the monasteries, except here, the subject is politics and not abstruse points of Buddhist dialectics. Excerpts from interviews with key members of the Tibetan community in exile – including the Dalai Lama – along with Chinese intellectuals engaged with the Tibetan question, touch upon the larger context of the monks' debate.

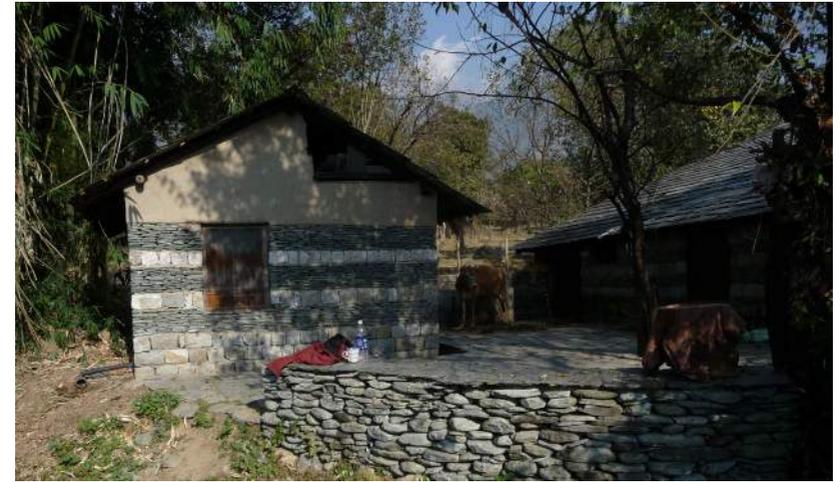


SOME QUESTIONS ON THE NATURE OF YOUR EXISTENCE

Single-channel video installation
25:36 | 2008

Filmed in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in South India, this piece explores the recondite world of Tibetan Buddhist debate. Built around three sets of debates dealing with the basic Buddhist concepts of impermanence, lack of self-existence, and dependent-arising, the video provides the ordinary viewer a rare opportunity to participate in this unique dialectical practice while highlighting its relevance to the modern world.

Commissioned by Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna



MUD STONE SLATE BAMBOO

Single-channel video installation
16:46 | 2011

Man and nature work together to create a traditional cow house in the Dharamshala area of Himachal Pradesh. Built of mud, stone, slate and bamboo, the emerging structure is imbued with centuries of tradition and wisdom, and highlights the natural aesthetics of a building that is in harmony with its surroundings.



A STRANGER IN MY NATIVE LAND

Documentary

32 minutes | 1998

A poignant and personal account of Tenzing Sonam's first-ever visit to his homeland. From the far reaches of Amdo (present-day Qinghai Province), where Tenzing's father was born and where many Tibetans have lost their language and cultural practices, to his mother's home in Lhasa, the spiritual heart of the country, the film captures his meetings with long-lost relatives and conveys a sense of the desperation of Tibet as a country under occupation.



THE SUN BEHIND THE CLOUDS

Documentary

79 minutes | 2009

In March 2008, the biggest uprising since China took control of Tibet in 1959 sweeps across the country, taking both the Chinese authorities and the exiled Tibetan community by surprise. Tibetan activists in India march on their homeland, determined to support their countrymen. This is a year of dramatic possibilities for Tibet. For more than 20 years, the Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual and political leader, has pursued his Middle Way Approach: giving up the goal of Tibet's independence in return for genuine autonomy. But China has consistently rejected his proposal. Now, with Tibet in turmoil, more and more Tibetans are questioning his strategy. Can the Dalai Lama's path of peace and compromise find a solution for Tibet? Or will the voices calling for independence prevail? Ritu and Tenzing set out on a personal quest to follow these historic events and understand their consequences for the Tibet movement.



WHEN HARI GOT MARRIED

Documentary

75 minutes | 2012

Hari, a 30-year-old taxi driver in Dharamshala, prepares for his arranged marriage to a girl he has never met, but with whom he has fallen in love on the mobile phone. Outspoken, opinionated and self-deprecatingly funny, Hari shares with Ritu and Tenzing his views on love, marriage, the state of India and his rising state of panic at the thought of finally meeting his bride. The film takes an intimate and humorous look at the changes that are taking place in rural India as modernity and globalisation meet age-old traditions and customs.

RITU SARIN & TENZING SONAM

Ritu was born in New Delhi. After graduating from Miranda House, Delhi University, she did her MFA in Film and Video at the California College of Arts in Oakland. Tenzing was born in Darjeeling to Tibetan refugee parents. He graduated from St. Stephens College and then did his Masters from the University of California, Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism.

Ritu and Tenzing have been working together since 1983, when, as students, they made their first film, *The New Puritans: The Sikhs of Yuba City* (1985). They lived in the San Francisco Bay Area and then in London for many years before moving back to Dharamshala in 1996.

Working through their film company, White Crane Films, they have made several documentaries, which include the award-winning *The Reincarnation of Khensur Rinpoche* (1991), *The Trials of Telo Rinpoche* (1993), and *The Shadow Circus: The CIA in Tibet* (1998), all commissioned by the BBC. Their documentary, *The Sun Behind the Clouds* (2009), won the Vaclav Havel Award at the One World Film Festival in Prague. Their latest documentary, *When Hari Got Married* (2012), premiered at Films From the South, Oslo, and was shown at DOK Leipzig and IDFA Amsterdam. Their films have been broadcast worldwide and screened widely in theatres.

Their debut feature film, *Dreaming Lhasa* (2005), was executive produced by Jeremy Thomas and Richard Gere, and premiered at the 2006 Toronto International Film Festival. They are currently working on their second dramatic feature, *The Sweet Requiem*, which they plan to shoot in the summer of 2016.

More recently, they started working on video installations. These include *Some Questions on the Nature of Your Existence* (2007), which was commissioned by Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary in Vienna and showed at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo and the Busan Biennale.

Ritu and Tenzing are also the founding directors of the Dharamshala International Film Festival, which they started in 2012 through their non-profit trust, White Crane Arts & Media. It is now considered to be one of India's leading independent film festivals.

Khoj International Artists' Association is a not-for-profit, contemporary art organisation based in New Delhi, which provides physical, intellectual and financial support for artists and creative practitioners. Through a variety of programmes including workshops, residencies, exhibitions, talks, and community art projects Khoj has built an international reputation as an outstanding alternative arts incubation space. Since 1997, Khoj has developed itself as a unique 'art lab', and has supported the experimentation of many leading Indian and International artists. It plays a central role in the advance of experimental, interdisciplinary, and critical contemporary art practice in India – constantly challenging the established thinking about art.

By bringing together a diverse range of artists and art practices, Khoj aims to facilitate change and awareness of vital global issues and concerns through active and engaged audience participation, and is seen as a vanguard of the vital optimism that is shaping contemporary India.

TIBET BURNING: Self-immolations, a Buddhist Weapon of Protest?

Ritu Sarin and **Tenzing Sonam** engage in a conversation with Ananya Vajpeyi, Venerable Kabir Saxena and Matthew Akester about the political and moral ramifications of the self-immolation protests in Tibet.

The idea of self-immolations as a weapon of political protest, with its gory imagery and echoes of suicide bombers, sits uncomfortably with many people and has divided opinion even among supporters of the Tibetan cause. It has been argued – and some of the last messages of the self-immolators reaffirm this – that the Tibetan self-immolations are rooted in a particularly Buddhist context and are not to be seen as an act of violence but rather, as a form of non-violent self-sacrifice that is in congruence with the highest ideals of Buddhism. But why are Tibetans resorting to this desperate form of protest in the first place?

Ananya Vajpeyi works at the intersection of intellectual history, political theory and critical philology. She is currently writing a book about the life and ideas of Dr B.R. Ambedkar.

Kabir Saxena became a Buddhist at the age of 21 while studying in the UK. He is the Spiritual Programme Coordinator and teacher of Basic Buddhist theory and practice at Tushita Delhi since late 2011.

Matthew Akester is an independent researcher and translator, and specialist in modern Tibetan history.

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Thanks to:

Matthew Akester
Bhuchung D Sonam
Natasha Ginwala
Akiba (Chris Wang)

www.whitecranefilms.com

*In collaboration with Thyssen-
Bornemisza Art Contemporary,
Vienna.*

OPENING RECEPTION

Thursday, 10 December 2015
18:30 onwards

Exhibition remains on view until
31 December 2015 from 11:00 to 19:00 daily

DAILY FILM SCREENINGS

14:30 | A Stranger in My Native Land
15:30 | The Sun Behind the Clouds
17:30 | When Hari Got Married

PANEL DISCUSSION

Saturday, 12 December 2015
17:00 - 19:00

Tibet Burning: Self-immolations, a Buddhist
Weapon of Protest?
Ritu Sarin & Tenzing Sonam in conversation
with Ananya Vajpeyi, Ven. Kabir Saxena &
Matthew Akester