

Mithu Sen  
**A°Void**

Galerie Krinzinger

Mithu Sen  
**A°Void**

<sup>5</sup> Daniela Zyman  
**Between certain forms of  
life and what is living**

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## Daniela Zyman

### Between certain forms of life and what is living

I met Mithu Sen in Tokyo in 2009. Our matchmaker was Fumio Nanjo, the longtime director of the Mori Art Museum. Sen had just returned from a residency in Tokushima, Japan, where she had worked for more than a month in a traditional paper mill using strong kozo fiber to produce sheets of paper that could hang from the ceiling for an upcoming exhibition. Each sheet was 3.5 x 2.4 meters. Sen toiled in this environment—in the hierarchical, male-dominated craft tradition of Japanese papermaking—without sharing the language, without any background in papermaking, and with the very apparent alterity of being a woman artist from India. Cunningly, she told me that night that she had had her way with the craftsmen.

But there was more to that night. Subsequently, after dinner, she told of how they had collectively manufactured these immaculate white sheets of paper, the highest achievement of craft and tradition. Immaculate as in pure, “free from mental and moral pollution,” without maculae, that is, spots or blemishes. Meanwhile she ventured into the world of anime and went to the bookstores that sell the most popular manga, or comic books, the ones sold in the back room, where traditionally only men enter. Again she crosses boundaries, intrepidly entering forbidden rooms. For weeks she collected the most exquisite erotic manga, absorbing the world of these publications—which may involve “violence, bad taste, excessive human feelings, [and] peaceful, fantastic, utopian, or apocalyptic” imagery—to use in the new work she was preparing for an upcoming exhibition.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> **Natacha Villamia Sochat**, “Manga”, <http://www.tufts.edu/programs/mma/fah188/sochat/Manga.htm>.

In fact, the world of manga and anime has a long tradition in Japan. Hokusai coined the term *manga* for his fifteen-volume *Hokusai manga* (1814–78), which “used caricature to criticize social conditions after the Tempō period (1830–1844).” Erotic imagery has long been a part of Japanese culture: “*Shunga* (spring drawings) was a popular type of ukiyo-e during the Tokugawa period [1603–1867]; these woodblock print pictures show uninhibited Japanese sexuality,” including “lesbian sex (which was then considered perfectly natural), *ménage à trois*, voyeurism, female autoeroticism, male homosexuality, and bestiality.”<sup>2</sup> So none of this is new, and we were also not surprised at the use of the erotic form and the superimposition and cohabitation of body parts, organs, sexual forms, and figures in animal and human shape in Mithu Sen’s art.

Yet what made my conversation with Sen so distinct and exceptional that I would remember it years later was the artist’s determination to overcome and leave behind everything that holds the promise of familiarity, the customary, any form of protection, and security: what she would call years later “the desire of not living the approved way.”<sup>3</sup> Endowed with a genuinely heartfelt sympathy for all beings, a tenderness for everything and everyone around her, the kindest of the kind, Mithu Sen—as I felt so clearly that night—erodes without the slightest hesitation and in absolute terms every form of comfort, feelings of homeliness, the confidence in acquired skills, and any position of certitude. Yet maybe this is not a contradiction. In her acts of subversion—and I think they are acts of resistance as well—innocence is not option; reliability and dependability have long vanished. What she exposes to the public is not the tantalizing shock of erotic desire but the image of a body that is muted, divulged, fragmented, and recomposed into new forms of being.

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<sup>2</sup> Kinko Ito, “Manga in Japanese History”, in *Japanese Visual Culture: Explorations in the World of Manga and Anime*, ed. Mark W. MacWilliams (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2008), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the artist are from correspondence with the author, 2014.

A “body without organs” is what Gilles Deleuze, following Antonin Artaud, has called the disorganized, discombobulated body whose organs are being put to new uses, in an act of rescue from pain, from power, from subjection, a concept that became foundational for most of the French philosopher’s later research. In Artaud’s view the body is not a benign, narcissistic vessel; it is the realm of affective intensities, a partialized object and automaton, lingering between the symbolic and the real.

When you will have made him a body without organs,  
then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions  
and restored him to his true freedom.<sup>4</sup>

We know of the body’s intensities, what are sometimes called erogenous zones, the topological intensities on surfaces, in limbs, zones of pain and pleasure, of fragility and vulnerability. Let us visualize a body of intensities, systematically unconnected or structurally unorganized, the emergence of impassioned configurations of limbic, animal, natural fragments. Is this alienated body still a body? Is it calling into question the central assumption of being human? Here the human’s holistic integrity is being deconstructed, his/her distinction from all animal forms, the separation from his/her environment, and the classification into gender, color, race. A fragmented body is in fact divorcing us from the rest of the world, divorcing us from our own likes.

<sup>2</sup> Antonin Artaud, *Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), 570–71.

Are the compositions that Sen assembles with such aptitude—in delicate hues and intense colors, rendered with elegant brushstrokes, through the changing effects of light gliding over the surfaces of acrylic glass, carrying the signs of engravings by her hand—are they representations of such “bodies without organs” or rather of “organs as bodies”? Is the space “between life and what is living,” to quote the title of a work shown her recent exhibition *A°VOID* at Galerie Krinzinger in Vienna, a *real* space of possibility or a metaphoric landscape of being and deconstruction?<sup>5</sup> Before further addressing these questions, it might be useful to refer to a discussion of one of Sen’s exhibitions, which gives a sense of how her work is perceived at times, how vividly it is described as being abject and repelling: “[Mithu Sen] shocked the viewer by repeatedly treating them to phallic body parts, especially the dark insides of the mouth, a stand-in for the vagina, and the slithering tongue. Her desire to communicate with the viewer about the unsayable, the ambiguous nature of female sexuality, was so intense that she alternately attracted and repelled them with her risqué attention-seeking devices. But these works are relatively subtle when compared to the present show, where the body entrails have spilled out. An unnaturally long garland of the intestine hangs loose in the inside room.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Mithu Sen, *between life and what is living*, 2014; mixed media on paper and hand engraving on acrylic glass; 121 x 106 x 3 cm.

<sup>6</sup> Artist in Conversation: Mithu Sen, Nancy Adajania & Andrew Maerkle

In these sentences it is well possible to identify the body’s intensities and fragmentations as well as its delivery from functional pursuits corresponding to the Deleuze’s quest for liberation. But let us argue that the proposed in-betweenness of “between life and what is living” also pursues very different ideas. Rather than butchering the body to pieces in order to shock her audience, Sen creates and visualizes new forms of life, of what is living, in its other-than-human form. These forms not only have the same agency as we humans do but also are part of us, part of our interior and exterior appearance. They show us “how other-than-human encounters open possibility for emergent realizations of worlds.”<sup>7</sup> The body decomposed into intensities is primarily semiotically constituted, a body that first and foremost expresses itself with and through signs, merged, superimposed, embedded in landscapes of natural form, inhabited by animals, spirits, forces.

In most myths of humankind, in all traditional forms of narrative, humans share and inhabit a world with other beings that have the same agency as them. In Hindi narratives, for example, it is not surprising to find a god that becomes human, transforms into a stone, mutates into a cow, has the head of an elephant, and so on. But it is not only the privilege of god to metamorphose into the realm of intersubjectivity; ordinary humans can inhabit the continuum of sensibility and affectivity—in other words, sentience and emotion—in their interconnection. In the pantheon of being, an object, a tree, or a bird mediates between some form of being (the self?) and the world that spans beyond it, and oftentimes in Sen’s series *Void* (2013) that world is a landscape. This interconnection does not only and exclusively mean, I would argue, that the constitutive elements—the bird, the landscape, and the body part, for instance—merge into additive realms or layers of possibilities. It means perhaps that they exist simultaneously in a kind of affective immediacy.

<sup>7</sup> Donna Haraway, blurb for Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), back cover.

Sen's *MOU (Museum of Unbelongings)* is ostensibly an installation work that has appeared in various configurations over the past few years but is in fact a lifetime commitment to "things" rather than a work of art, a manifestation of the desire to personalize, care, and connect with objects and possessions of apparent unimportance. It is here that I locate the material nexus of the world of drawings and figures that resurface regularly in the artist's cosmology. Thus it is decisive to grant this cosmology of objects that Sen calls "my children" some attention: "piles of ordinary, unnoticed, unnecessary, abandoned, impermanent toys and unusual belongings, possessed as my children with a passionate priority (a burden too) [are] drawn together at a single point of time and entangled with each other and personalized by individual names. A popular archive of cultural memory beyond the objects' historical identity. . . . An unidentified deity who cannot be historicized . . . a record of a life, a history of a vernacular culture and a symbolic archive of impermanence."

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<sup>8</sup> Sandra Noeth, unpublished talk at TBA21–Augarten, Vienna, 2013: "Duras nennt ihr Schreiben eine littérature d'urgence, eine Literatur der Dringlichkeit. Dabei geht es darum, statt literarisch zu konstruieren, die Wörter 'zu fangen wie sie kommen.' Das geht nur, indem man schnell schreibt und sich schreibend überstürzt."

In one of her late and very personal books, called *Écrire* (1993), the celebrated and much-honored French writer Marguerite Duras describes the way in which writing (*écrire*) fills an inner void, a hole in the middle of existence. As Sandra Noeth has stated, "Duras describes her writing as *littérature d'urgence*, a literature of urgency. Thus, the task is to capture words as they come rather than to construct literature. This is possible only by writing rapidly and precipitously."<sup>8</sup>

In this sense, for Duras, *écrire, c'est tout*. Writing is everything. Writing is totality. It is exhaustive and definitive. But also: *Écrire, je ne peux pas. Personne ne peut. I cannot write. No one can.* The space between this totality and its negation, between the ability, aptitude, necessity, and urgency of writing and its utter failure, not only the personal breakdown of the writer but also the total incapacity of everyone to write, writing as a capability beyond human capacity and skill— this is a space that many have possibly experienced but only a few have explored.

For many years Sen had a promising career as writer. She published books and poetry and could have gone on to write more books. She was a skilled writer, and it was easy for her to use words. A few years back, after a long hiatus, when she set out to compose her new book, she did as she always had. She started typing words and sentences, paragraphs and pages in her computer in her native Bengali language. And writing for Sen has always been a bodily process but also a duel with words and language. "Writing to me is like drawing, an act with brain and the nervous system, hormonal functions and involved in an act of puking everything together . . . pulling out from within . . . writing to me is emotion . . . but writing is associated with a language too. . . . I find it is that language which imposes a strange and alien logic that tells us not to smell poetry, hear shadows or taste lights. Escaping this rigid framework, I seek to locate communication outside the narrow alleys of comprehension."

When she finally wanted to access the writing that she had just completed, the computer failed and recomposed the legible text into sets of signs and symbols that were outside of language, possibly creating a new artificial language, “computer gibberish.” Sen desperately tried to rescue her words, to repair the faulty program, but to no avail. What was once written with the urgency of the writer had broken down; only the symbols and traces of that activity remained intact. The meaning was lost. She had created a new “asemic” text. Although this new “material” did not convey meaning, it was still the *chiffre*, or figure, of the initial urgency of its writing. Titled *I Am a Poet*, it conveys today in the form of a book and a related performative project the sincere attempt at “giving voice to the subconscious emotions, usually, marginalized by the codes of social and lingual hierarchy.”<sup>9</sup> The rescued text is read in public performances, in which both the artist and the public voice and record their own utterances and readings of the text.

In a statement for the project, Sen writes: “Not bound by the rules of grammar, diction, vocabulary and syntax, the poems in this book suggest another medium of understanding. . . . I invite you to embrace ‘nonsense’ as resistance and comb out utterance from your subconscious, thereby giving voice to all those moments that exist but are not realized or lived.”<sup>10</sup> Subsequently she invites the viewers, her audience, to read aloud the texts that she had composed in the new language of emotions and to record their reading to be collected in an archive of voices. This collection of sounds/voices of human emotions frozen in the process of expressing something but unable to do so due to a lack of language is to the artist something of an ur-language, an unheard “marginalized voice of humanity” to be archived for posterity, for a time when all known languages will have dissolved.

I have tried to identify and to extract three moments in Mithu Sen's oeuvre that I see as fundamentally interrelated: her genuine aptitude for resistance and subversion; the conception of an ontological zone of in-betweenness populated by other-than-human beings and forms of life that are relational and perspectival; and the use of language to erode the very narrow zone of comfort defined by social rules and pragmatics. I would like to suggest that these three nexuses are interconnected tangents that all seek to probe new spaces of articulation, not so much for the artist's personal expression but as a possibility for us as humans to transcend the narrow capacities of our emotions, lives, and imaginations.

<sup>9</sup> Mithu Sen, in press release for Galerie Krinzinger exhibition, 2014

<sup>10</sup> Mithu Sen, wall text for *I Am a Poet* (2013).

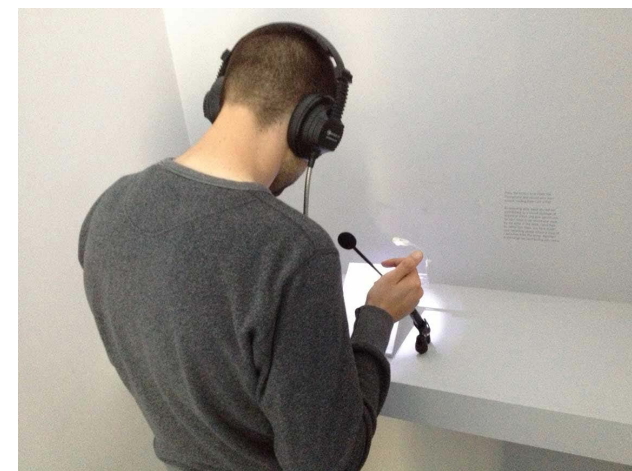
## Exhibition views



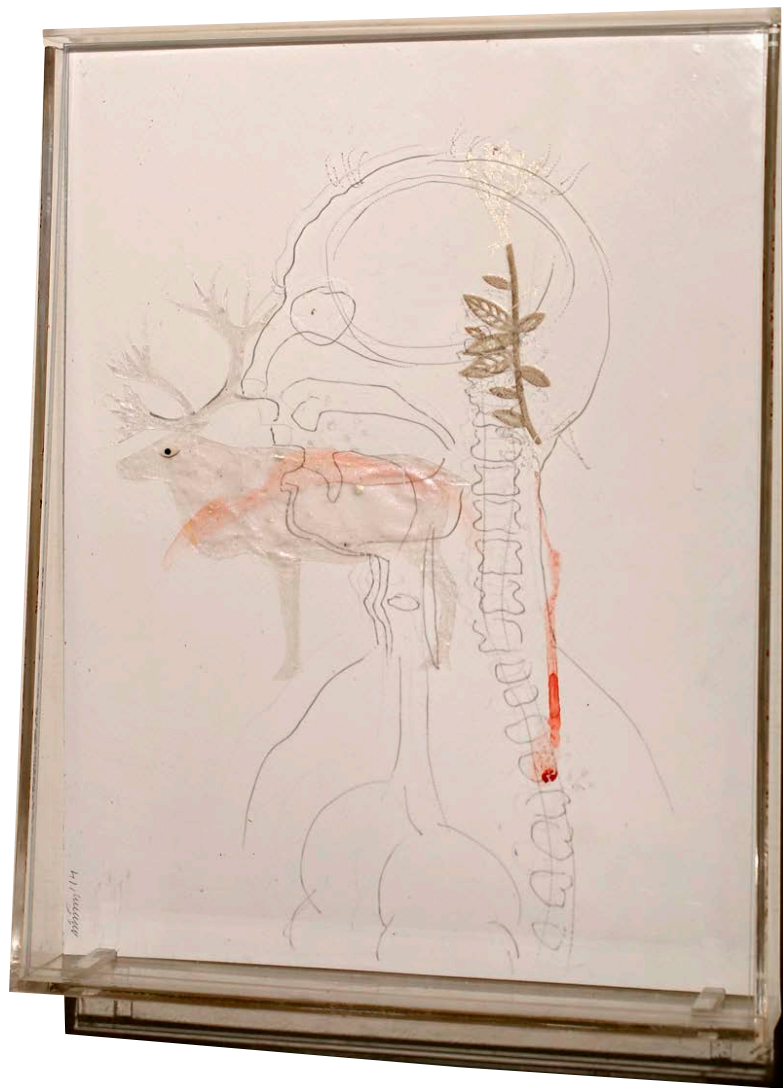








## Works



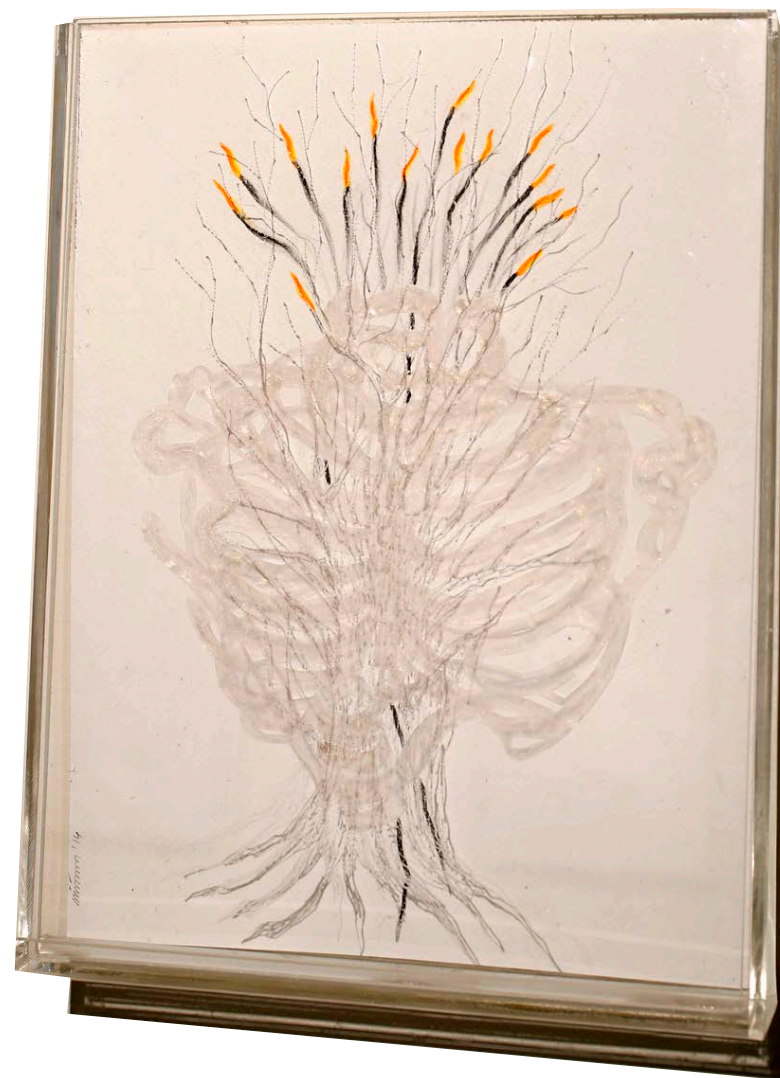
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Tongues that won't stop wounding 7



Tongues that won't stop wounding 6

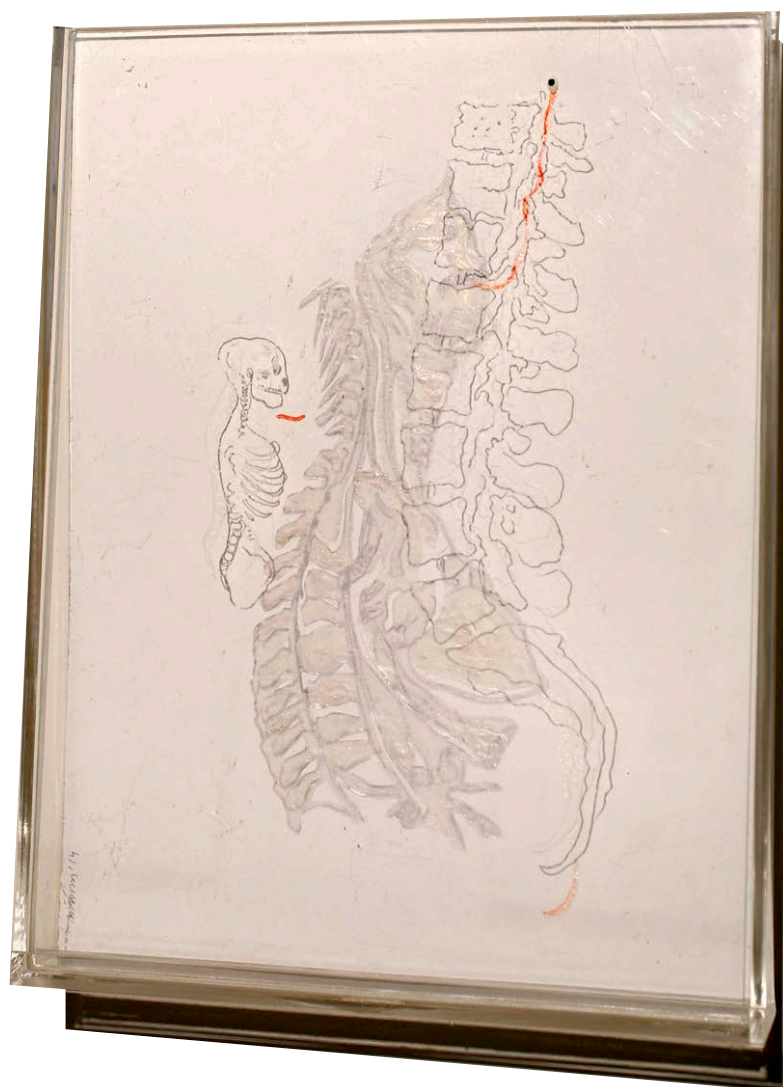


Tongues that won't stop wounding 5

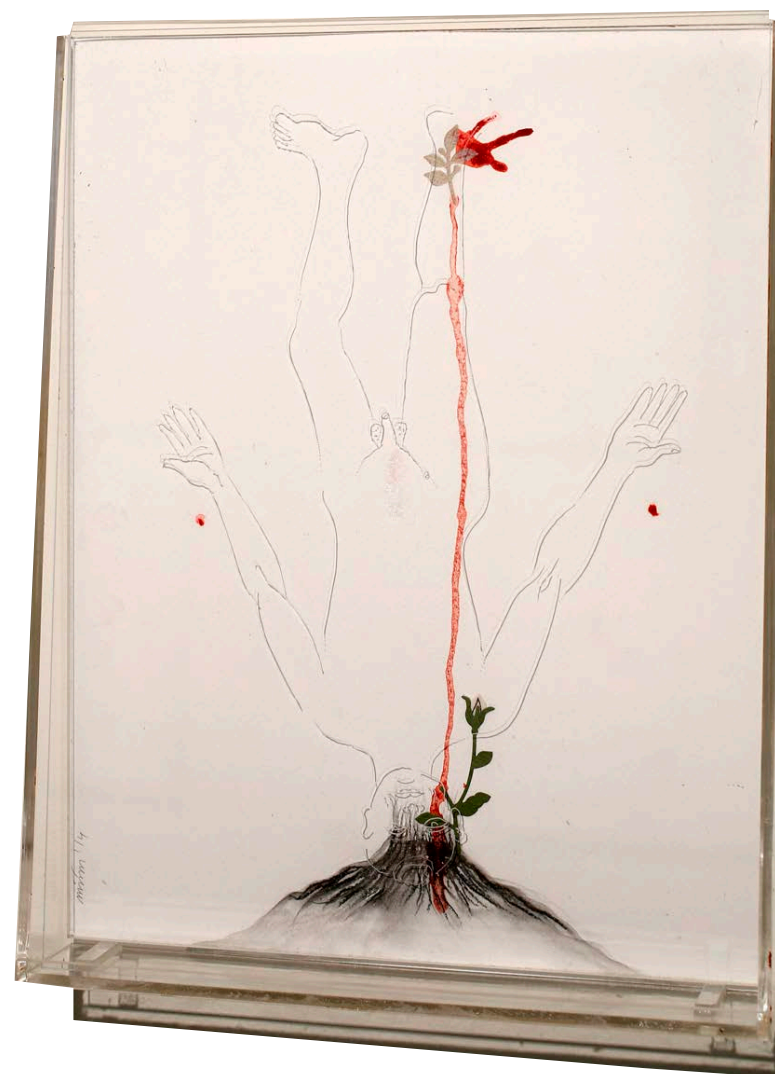


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individual mythologies



„non-memory“



ex-river guide



home, a temporary place







home, a temporary place



a day of standing still



home, a temporary place



once did exist











I'm a poet

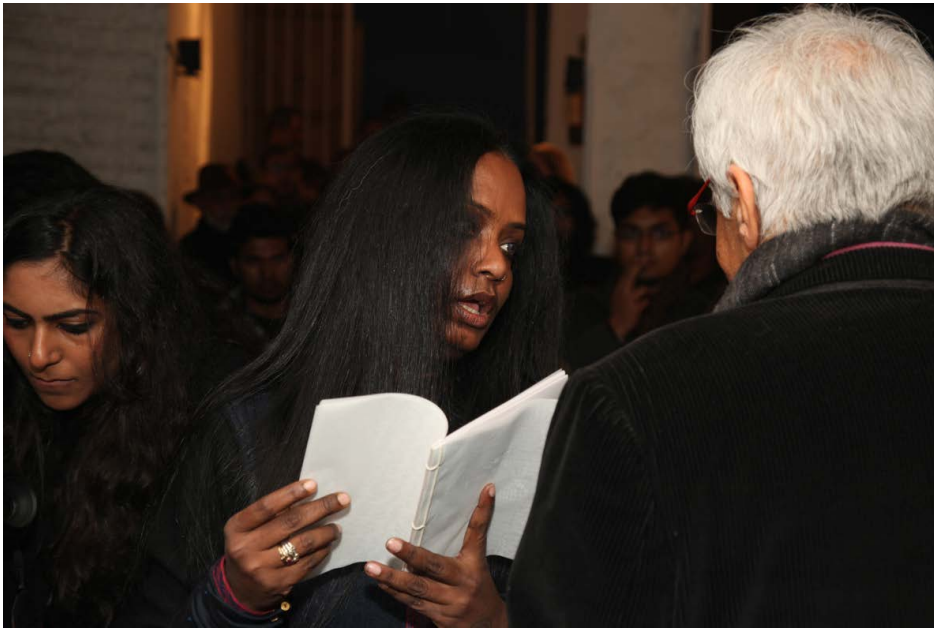


Performance «I'm a poet»











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## Artist Biography

Born 1971 in West Bengal, India  
Lives and works in New Delhi, India

Mithu Sen is a New Delhi based artist who is celebrated both in India and abroad for her fantastical and provocative multi-media works that earned her India's inaugural Skoda Prize in 2010. Sen's intuitive, free-spirited practice invites viewers into her own personal psyche and streams of consciousness, allowing them to discover new identities including their own.

Sen's practice stems from a strong drawing background that has extended into video, sculpture, installations, and sound works that further draw the viewer into her psyche. In addition to popular images that she turns into puns, many of the recurring motifs in her dreamlike works, such as teeth, birds, and spinal columns, have deeper psychoanalytic readings that tie into our subconscious thoughts about sexuality.

## Solo Exhibitions (Selection)

- 2014 A" V O I D, Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna
- 2013 Cannibal Lullaby, Gallery Nathalie Obadia Gallery, Brussels, Belgium
- 2012 „Devoid“- Galleria Nathalie Obadia, Paris
- 2011 „in House Adoption“- Galerie Steph and Nature Morte, Singapore
- „In Transit“- Espace Louis Vuitton, Taipei
- 2010 Nothing Lost in T, Nature Morte, Barten
- Stack Candy - Chemould Prescott Road Gallery, Mumbai
- 2009 Mithu Sen: „Me Two“, Krinzinger Projekte, Vienna, Austria
- Mithu Sen: Dropping Gold, Dropping Gold Suzie-Q Projects, Zürich, Switzerland
- 2007 Mithu Sen - New works in multiple media, Nature Morte, New Delhi, India
- Mithu Sen- Half Full Part I, Bose Pacia Gallery, New York, USA
- 2006 Mithu Sen, Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai, India

## Group Exhibitions (Selection)

- 2013 Audible Forces, curated by Diana Campbell Betancourt, first in the series called 1after320, at F-320, Lado Sarei, New Delhi, 2013.
- We are Ours. A collection of the Manifestos for the Instant, Khoj Studios, New Delhi
- Aesthetic Bind, Phantomata. Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai
- Mapping Gender: Bodies and Sexualities in Contemporary Art Across the Global South

- School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal, Nehru University, Delhi
- I for Inscription, by Paradox and 1x1 Art Gallery in collaboration with J.P. Morgan, at the Luxe Museum, Singapore
- The Body in Indian Art, International Art Festival Europalia, Centre for Fine Arts, Brussels Aesthetic Bind: Subject of Death. Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai
- Word. Sound. Power. I am a Poet. Performance at Tate Modern Project Space, London
- Peak Shift Effect. Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi
- 2012 Narratives of the Seil, Gallery Esoace, New Delhi, India
- Slipping Trough The Cracks, Latitude 28, New Delhi
- Conscious stream, Nature Morte New Delhi
- 2011 Generation in Transition. New Art from India. Zacheta National Gallery, Warsaw, Poland
- 2010 Aktualität eines Mediums. Nader Ahriman bis Chen Zhen. Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna, Austria
- 2009 India 3: New Delhi REPUBLIC OF ILLUSIONS, Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna, Austria
- Emotional Drawing, SOMA Museum of Art, Seoul, South Korea
- Tracing Time - Works on Paper Bodhi Art Mumbai
- 2008 Review – CIMA, Centre International Modern Art, Calcutta, India
- This is the Gallery and the Gallery is Many Things - Eastside Projects, Birmingham (England)
- 10th Anniversary Exhibition. Part 1. - Galerie Müller & Plate, Munich
- Exploding The Lotus -Art and Culture Center of Hollywood, Hollywood, CA
- 2007 International Incheon Women Artist's Biennale, Incheon
- Gallery Collection - Bodhi Art Singapore, Singapore
- Tiger by the Tail! - The Rose Art Museum, Waltham, MA
- Horn Please. Erzählen in der zeitgenössischen indischen Kunst - Kunstmuseum Bern, Bern, Switzerland
- Private Corporate IV - Daimler Contemporary, Berlin, Germany
- Here, there, now - contemporary art from India Gallery Soufflower, Bangkok

- 2006 EX-OTICA - VITAMIN Arte Contemporanea, Turin, Italien
- Anita Dube, Bharti Kher, Mithu Sen - New Works - Nature Morte, India – New Delhi, New Delhi, India
- 2004 Group Exhibition - Nature Morte - New Delhi, New Delhi, India



## Imprint

This catalogue is published on the occasion of the exhibition  
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