

COUNTER-HISTORIES IN SOUMYA SANKAR BOSE'S PHOTOGRAPHY

By Kristi Kar

"What does it mean to be born a citizen with a camera in a world where citizens are governed alongside millions of others who have been deprived of the same rights under the same governing system?" [1] During her masterclass, visual theorist Ariella Azoulay raises a valid concern in her question by binding the act of 'seeing' in photography to the ethics of representation. In her book, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Azoulay describes the function of photography as a "civil contract" [2] between the photographer and the subject. Through the act of its very existence, a photograph enables histories to survive that are otherwise delegitimised and excluded from politically controlled archives.

Although photography's ability to act as a counter-archive was not inherent, it evolved historically. While its earliest days were shaped by its documentative intent in the early 19th century, the medium gradually evolved to produce meaning independently through its visual syntax. Even within the constraints of traditional forms like portraiture, photographers like August Sander in *Faces of Time* [3] started pushing the limits by turning the work into an ethnographic observation. By the mid-20th century, with the contributions from Robert Frank and Duane Michal, the visual grammar and sequencing in photographic practices underwent a radical shift. Living no longer under the compulsion of objective truth-telling, photography opened itself to interiority and non-canonical truths, capable of weaving alternate histories. By appropriating lived experiences, creating proof of violence, and revisiting historical (or personal) events through a human-focused lens, it became an efficient medium for holding socio-cultural counternarratives.

Contemporary Indian photographer Soumya Sankar Bose's photographic work produces counternarratives from this 'third space' [4] between the archival and symbolic. Bose resists straight shortcuts, asking us to take long detours through the body of his work before finally arriving at meaning. Through a close reading of his projects, I want to uncover three methodological strands in Bose's visual storytelling that revisit the history of his land, explore his family archive, and approach personal myths of neurodivergence with fatal endings.



Fig. 1: Soumya Sankar Bose, "Portrait of Bokul Majhi, Survivor of the Marichjhapi Massacre," from the series *Where the Birds Never Sing*, 2020.



Fig. 2: Soumya Sankar Bose, "Man Submerged in Water," from the series *Where the Birds Never Sing*, 2020.

An Alternate History of Political Violence

Bose's work, *Where the Birds Never Sing* (2017-20), returns to Bengal's infamous post-partition Marichjhapi Massacre (Figs. 1 and 2). In this series, he comes closest to the claim that visual language can act as a parallel archive to history. During the incident, an estimated 10,000 people seeking shelter on the island were brutally murdered by the government; yet the official death toll was declared as 'less than ten'. [5] Declared as a Tiger Reserve, the island was subsequently restricted from migrant habitation.

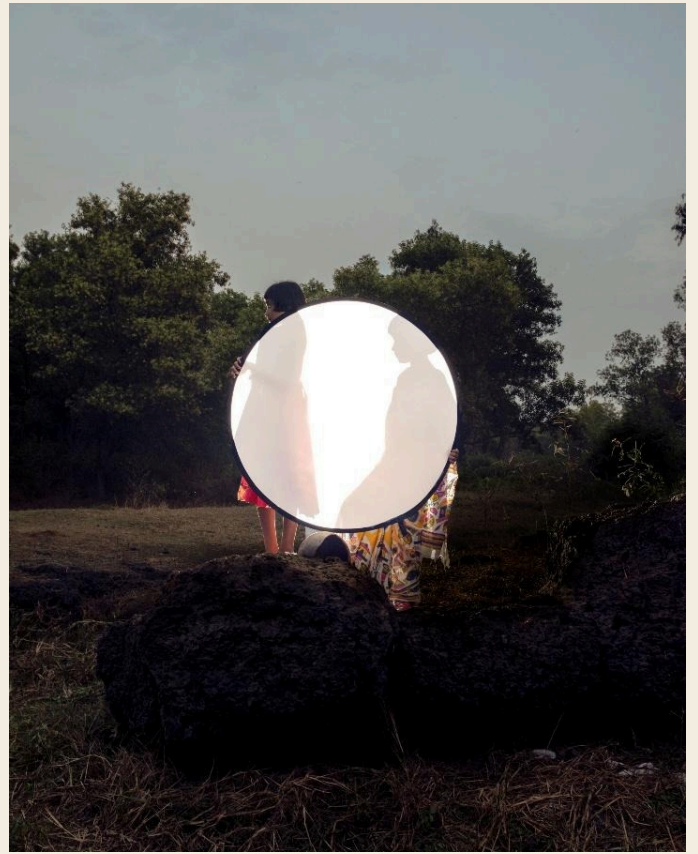
Bose opens up the wounds of Marichjhapi, working with archival materials that involve newspaper cuttings and manifestos, but he also seeks out survivors of the incident to create a parallel archive. While he cannot set foot on the island, he describes his method as remembering a house that is no longer there through the memory of its residents. While he has to reconstruct images for it to be photographed, he ensures that these are not entirely disconnected from the lived experience of communities whose lineage still inhabits adjacent islands in the Sunderbans. He is not doing this in a different site or from the comfort of his studio, which would have turned him into a glaring appropriator; rather, his re-enactment actively negotiates with the suppressed history of the land and the victims by being present in the same spaces.

Bose's visuals of a hand emerging out of the dark holding a gun, a lone tree standing in a swamp, and submerged human bodies in the marshlands bring out the social tension and the ecological anxiety of the time, as remembered by the survivors. While it was convenient for authorities to log the deaths into files and leave them silent, Bose's work defies that ease. Instead, he lets these images exist boldly in the gaps within the cobwebs of administrative red tape.

Elimination as a Visual Method

This parallel archiving has become a seminal element in Bose's practice, but in his later works, he moves slightly inward. Instead of larger socio-political events and issues, he engages with family history, the smallest social unit, as his site. His photobook, *A Discreet Exit Through Darkness/Things We Lost Last Night*, works with missing memories in his family archive (Figs. 3-5). It captures Bose's mother's disappearance as a nine-year-old who went to buy sweets in the neighbourhood one day and did not return home for two and a half years.

Bose's mother has no recollections of her missing years, all through which her father launched an intensive search for her. The images in *A Discreet Exit Through Darkness* go back in time to hover around the contour of this disappearance during the search, and then directly enter Bose's mother's memories.



Figs. 3-5: Soumya Sankar Bose, from the series *A Discreet Exit Through Darkness*, 2024.

As a result, we encounter entities with their faces blurred, overexposed with flash that they look lit up like the sun, or masked creatures evoking an ominous sense of despair and grief in the audience. Interestingly, Bose uses light, a medium that mostly reveals, to obscure details in his photographs.

Does Bose directly talk about child-trafficking here? No, he simply takes the other route. By channelling a collective of voices that never made it to the newspapers or rose to the stature of narrators in a novel, he moves from the informational aspect of this disappearance (summed up in a two-by-two corner of the newspaper) to the immensity of felt emotions. In his method of recording a history of grief, despair, and trauma, these disappearances become more impactful than being remembered through just statistics.

The physical copy of Bose's book houses two tales. The second story, *Things We Lost at Night*, has Bose's mother as the narrator. During the transition to the second story (you have to flip the book to enter it), Bose uses images of a shrivelled-up navel, which is followed by visually similar images of ripples in a pond. While the navel is located within the body and thus refers to personal history, it receives a gradual sublimation from that meaning, denoting Shanu's journey of travelling from the body to the beyond, shifting from daughter to woman.

There is not a single picture of Bose's mother in the book, despite her being the fulcrum of the narrative. By leaving this hollow in the middle and surrounding it with images, he feeds into this void constantly with probabilities of violence. Describing a few, he illustrates a local myth through a grotesque image of a witch hanging in the branches of the bael tree on a full-moon night, with insects coming out of her genitals. There is also an image of a neighbourhood football match that ended with the eyeballs of the other team plucked out and thrown in the mud, and another of a woman being immolated.

While photography is primarily a medium of "show, don't tell," Bose's work takes it a notch higher by using a "don't show, yet tell" approach. Shanu's absence in the book becomes a heavy tactile burden for us, where we start actively searching for her just as her father did. While "my daughter has gone amiss" is sufficient to understand her disappearance in words, for images, her absence can only be understood by the act of elimination. In text, 'she' has to be invoked to denote her disappearance; in images, she is simply missing.

Representing Personal Myths through Visual Schemas

While Bose uses the visual medium to narrate political truths and create counter-archives, his latest work, *We Need to Talk in Whispers*, moves inward into the psychological. He adapts a found diary in a train compartment belonging to a semi-fictional thanatology researcher called Brinni, who disappears, leaving only the diary as a trace after this chance encounter. The diary contains multiple suicide notes as entries, with notes sprawled in the margins from the researcher. The idea behind the work is to show the images that surface in the consciousness in the final moments of a person's death. But since the images and their witness are dead and gone, the final version that we see is reimagined by the photographer. He takes apart each story and rebuilds it through images that reinvent the "neurotic's individual myth." [6]

The ethical question of representation enters the discourse as the photographer inserts himself between first-hand narrators and the audience, acting as the primary visual narrator and running the risk of reductivism. The final images we see are thrice removed from the 'real' experiences of the people who committed suicide. However, Bose moves between the stories with exceptional ease, creating separate visual schemas for each of these entries. His elements include photographs, handwritten notes, and even the digital consciousness of Brinni as an LLM installation able to represent each of the voices uniquely. Bose invites his audience to decode these visual clues to arrive at the individual accounts of psychological distress.

He uses a four-by-four image grid of objects that a disappeared man (one of the characters from the diary), Tapan, had left behind (Fig. 6). While Tapan's disappearance occupied a space in the newspaper with details about where he was last seen and what time he had called his mother last, this grid containing everyday objects like his worn-out helmet, a lantern, an iron, and a small vial of attar becomes a personal museum to read Tapan's story. Similarly, in another entry, Bose takes apart the gaze of a 20-year-old woman who committed suicide in a sea-facing hotel room in Puri (Fig. 7). Along with the objects she carried (a plastic flower vase and a book, *The Myth of Sisyphus*), Bose took pictures of beds and the sea, and incorporated negative images of childhood memories, capturing a longing to return to a place of rest.



Fig. 6: Soumya Sankar Bose, Installation view of still lifes from the case study on the disappearance of Tapan Mondal, from the series *We Need to Talk in Whispers*, 2026, at Experimenter, Ballygunge Place, Kolkata.



Fig. 7: Soumya Sankar Bose, Photograph from the case study on Srimoyee, from the series *We Need to Talk in Whispers*, 2026.

His shifting visual semiology for each story seems to suggest that suicide is not a homogeneous, singular event. The cause-and-effect relationship is more complicated, with inescapable childhood guilt, gendered trauma, violation, spiritual delusions, response to terminal illnesses, or simply despair resulting in fatal endings. Bose asks us to decode each of the 'whys' through visual cues, letting the representation remain intact rather than reducing them to a single query.

While Bose works with these cause-and-effect relationships to create representation in his body of work, he is equally committed to withholding his gaze. In one such case, he narrates the story of a librarian, Ira, with a complex relationship with her neighbour, Rabi. Ira was molested by Rabi when she was 13. While most death entries in his body of work are first-hand accounts, Rabi's suicide is mediated through Ira's narration. Bose appropriates Ira's gaze, looking through her window into Rabi's house.

While one expects to see images from a suburban household or images of a man suffering, what we get is an endless reiteration of old brick houses in the dark, with only about three photographs featuring human characters. Instead of offering visual access to Rabi's story, the lens averts its eyes from it. This deliberation lets Ira's gaze breathe instead of the audience trying to psychoanalyse Rabi and figure out why he did what he did through an observation of his personal space. In this context, Bose's siding with Ira as a spectator of her perpetrator's death definitely feels like a political decision. He consciously chooses where to stand, how to look, and most importantly, when not to look.

Probably, that is why the photographs in this series are blurred, distant, foggy, fleeting, mimicking the 'whisper' and the taboo surrounding the topic of mental health and its demises. Highlighting one of the most critical crises of our time, [7] Bose chooses these intimate images that linger far longer in the mind than statistical reports that turn these human deaths into numbers.

Sometimes, the aim of visual language is not to replicate, but to respond to reality. What it retrieves is not the same in form and shape as what was lost, but a version of it that is reinvented. In Harve Guibert's book *Ghost Image*, the author describes how, as a teenager, he attempted to take a portrait of his camera-shy mother. He meticulously prepared her for it, fixing her hair and placing her in the right light, before pulling the shutter. Despite his efforts, the photograph that came out was finally a blank strip of film; it failed to capture her, as she was in the moment. Later, on his failure to evoke certain images, Guibert writes, "...sometimes nothing appears that is tangible. Nothing but the shape of a nose. Nothing but an inflection of a voice. Or the colour of hair. Nothing more than a very fluid and incomplete image, painful for the effort it requires of us, and in its plea to exist again." [8]

Just like Guibert's failure to capture his mother, meaning in Bose's work remains elusive and refuses to be stabilized into a singular image. The act of seeing transcends the limits of a visual language with overexposed lights, moody colour palettes, and displaced faces and objects. Even after pressing the shutter, Bose's interventions live on as afterimages that are never fully contained by a strip of film, but burn a negative imprint on the mind.

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Figure Acknowledgements

All the images used in this piece are courtesy Soumya Sankar Bose.

Notes

[1] Ariella Azoulay, "Toward the Abolition of Photography's Imperial Rights," Masterclass, Leiden University, The Hague, January 17, 2023.

[2] Ibid., 17.

[3] August Sander, *Faces of Time* (Schirmer/Morsel, 2008).

[4] "Third Space" is a concept by Homi K. Bhaba, which theorizes a socio-cultural space where marginalized identities can challenge dominant narratives.

[5] Deep Halder, *Blood Island: An Oral History of the Marichjhapi Massacre* (Harper Collins, 2019), 19.

[6] "Neurotic's Individual Myth" is a 1953 lecture by Jacques Lacan, where he claims that a neurotic person builds their own symbolic narrative or myth from their life history to make sense of their story and manage unconscious conflicts.

[7] According to the WHO, suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15-29-year-olds, with more than 72,0000 people dying due to suicide every year.

[8] Hervé Guibert, *Ghost Image* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), 131.