

Resisting Melancholy: Filing the Real in Dayanita Singh's *File Room*

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Supported by Murthy NAYAK Foundation/ PhotoSouthAsia

First published by Critical Collective, 2022.

It is hard to deny the arresting punctum of *File Room's* towering compositions. Monumental, and yet contained within the frames of Dayanita Singh's razor-sharp photography, these stacks of files and documents highlight the withering vestiges of our stately, bureaucratic past—a past that is now slowly being accessioned into the virtual sphere from the physically archived. Quite literally then, these photographs present themselves as “an elegy to paper in the age of the digitization of information and knowledge” [1], documenting a fitting farewell to a remnant of a time past.

However, this poetic memorialization quickly loses its charm when one enters the composition and stands amidst the towering stack of files that these photographs capture. The first thought that comes to mind throws the viewer in an awkward state of trepidation—“How do I navigate across the room so that this stockpile of fifty-year-old files does not fall on me?” And as if delicately handling the moth-ridden files was not enough, one is scarcely left with enough time to be mesmerized by the overwhelming presence of hundreds of names meticulously identifying each file before the state official quickly ushers you out of the file room, leaving behind a wake of dust and the echoes of a person coughing in the distance.



So, how do we examine the aesthetic intentionality of these photographs? In what ways do we perceive *File Room's* precariously balanced chaos? In this suffocatingly expansive world where a combined history of several decades rests under the tense knot of bureaucratic tape, there are two issues that require our attention. The first is to identify what the photographs appear to signify (beyond the literally stated). The second—and the more passionately subjective—issue is to scrutinize what has already been said about the

photographs and to understand the origin of such commentary. I shall address the latter first to arrive at the former.

Writing for the Hasselblad Foundation, Orhan Pamuk recently reminisced that witnessing *File Room* allowed him to be mesmerized enough to “smell” a particular scent that such filing cabinets and papers exuded. [2] This romantic sigh for the Turkish novelist was closely associated with the auratic presence of Singh’s work, where the photographs radiated a beautifying melancholy that the (largely Western) world has come to associate with the likes of Greco-Roman art and sculptures in antiquity. Pamuk’s writing, however, while denigrating Indian archives as “places capable of turning even the healthiest person into an asthmatic,” [3] seemingly remains ignorant of the continuous crusade the average Indian undertakes in order to gain access to or change an entry in such records. These stores of information become sites of frustration and horror, where access is more often than not denied, or highly regulated by the bulwarks of the state—the archivists, the assistants, or the clerks. In front of desperate pleas and cries, these officers (and their seemingly alien systems of alpha-numeric classification and systematization) tend to become the only authoritative tether people have to survive in a bureaucratic quagmire that still maintains attested copies of all documents in triplicate.

The sanitized, distanced viewing of *File Room* in its usual presentation forgoes the despondency that startles the average citizen when any official work requires the submission of documents. These are files that deeply touch ordinary lives daily, and it is the weight of this reality that makes reading a commentary such as Pamuk’s just a bit more fatiguing. Aweek Sen’s accompanying essay for *File Room*, “Sea of Files,” makes this acutely felt for the uneasy reader when he recounts, after the death of Singh’s father, Mahinder, the agony of (re)arranging, submitting, and following up with countless files and court orders that Singh’s mother went through and felt. Sen relates her experience, “People told me I should be wearing white. But who had the time to think about such mundane things?” [4] Here, one realizes how the harrowing pervasiveness of such documents cuts through even the most powerful (and painful) of emotions. Suddenly, your life is thrown into a whirlpool of amending birth and death certificates, health cards, insurance papers, bank account statements, inheritance papers, tax and pension details. The horizon fails to hover into view until you are either triumphed over by the state and its entropy, or sound the bell of defeat and withdraw (which, frankly, seems not so different from the first choice). Singh’s mother chose the latter, stating, “People ask me why I gave up. To give up, I tell them, is the only way out of this country of perpetual stay orders, this land of status quo.” [5]



To understand these photographs is to therefore acknowledge that by Singh's masterful action of 'shooting' such images, *File Room* sublimates a murder where such files are suspended in a symbolic possession. They oscillate between an exotic fantasy of yesteryears and the mundane yet overwhelmingly burdensome existence of our daily lives. Pamuk finds

himself associating with the former, seeking a melancholic aesthetic appeasement. Perhaps a better invocation could be found in Susan Sontag's thoughtful essay "Melancholy Objects," which might lead one to identify *File Room* as an "inventory of mortality," a surreal presentation of life and its deathly vulnerability that photography captures [6]. However, I find it hard to resonate with such an elegiac language that honours the profundity of these photographs, and for a very straightforward reason—I fear to find my own name in this Kafkaesque reality, written in block letters on a crumpling paper, withered under the terse weight of others, and slowly fading out of existence. This realization, I believe, becomes crucial in understanding what the files say as they speak back to us.

The hazardous stillness that *File Room* portrays in the documents does not simply testify to the memorialization of a bureaucratic past but also excavates a more trenchant meaning in the present. The past decade has found the state working overtime, concentrating its energies into systematizing and unifying exabytes of personal data and online records. A frenzy of information aggregation has resulted in the creation of unified interfaces that link identification, payment transactions, taxation and social securities under a single 'unique' identifier. Packets of files have become packets of data, and yet the information ziggurat operates in the same manner as it did a century ago. We still have to constantly 'file' for rights and petitions and submit (upload) documents to process (or gain access to) our data. Today's notary officer and software technician has become the modern-day archivist. Moreover, if the file handlers in Singh's photographs smile back, it seems like an ethereal fantasy (when was the last time a government official, sitting in a dingy corner office and processing data, did anything without frustration?).

Viewing Singh's photographs, in such a reality, brings alive the troubling image of how personal data is being stockpiled online—being no less nuclear than the moth-infested files decomposing in the dreary and damp storage cabinets that *File Room* represents. Online servers are no less susceptible to damage and destruction than physical storage spaces. If the latter, historically, was threatened by water spillage, fire, pest infestation, or simply careless keeping, the former is equally liable to come under cyber-attacks and safe-cracking sabotage (more likely however, a more terrorizing everyday reality looms over 'protected' mobile applications and online safekeeping—that of simply forgetting your passcode). Additionally, it is not uncommon to find such records deliberately misplaced or destroyed, often, at the dirty hands of the state itself. Pamuk finally reaches this point after satiating his romantic nostalgia. "What primarily made the state a state were not its soldiers and police, but these folders, records, documents and papers," writes the novelist, remarking

how a single missing entry in these files prompted the bureaucracy to sternly reprimand his person. [7] *File Room*'s presence as a work of art in this age of mechanical reproduction, therefore, realizes this troubling and awesome power of the state—these files quite literally symbolize the potent capabilities of those in rule, with a wide-ranging faculty of, for example, authorizing someone's citizenship or declaring them *persona non grata* by a single issuance of official paper.

I remember feeling slightly like a jilted lover when I looked at *File Room* and read Pamuk's essay. Not because he got to write about it before I could, but because for the longest time I felt that such melancholic exposition failed in responding to the reality of Singh's photographs. In a debauched sense, it felt akin to the furore experienced by Sharbat Gula when she came forth to criticize Steve McCurry's handiwork of clicking her picture and publishing it without her consent. [8] Do I find the commentary on *File Room* similar to how the West behaved towards the Third World after they saw Gula's image on the cover of *National Geographic* magazine? Perhaps. Perhaps, for Western academia, *File Room*'s 'pictures that you can smell' emanate the scent of colonial empire, and in its remembrance, fill the viewer with the melancholy that comes with reminiscing the glorious conquests of imperialism. It has been close to a decade since Dayanita Singh visualized *File Room*, and despite my tirade here, ultimately, I see the photographs as a documentation of the present first, and fine art photography second. *File Room* presents a site of brooding contemplation over our very existence, a very 'official' perception of who we are, where we can live and what we can do. In these photographs, we do not see an infinitude that inspires our suppressed melancholy, but witness the persistence of naked life, constantly being filed together, and touched by the very literal hands of the state.

Isn't it interesting that no loose sheets fall across the floor in such file rooms?



All photographs by Dayanita Singh. From *File Room*, Germany: Steidl (2013). Images courtesy of the artist.

Notes:

[1] Dayanita Singh, "Introduction" in *File Room*, Germany: Steidl (2013).

[2] Orhan Pamuk, "'Images you can smell' - novelist Orhan Pamuk on Dayanita Singh's mesmerising photos of India's disintegrating archives", *The Guardian* (20th June 2022). <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/jun/20/novelist-orhan-pamuk-dayanita-singhs-mesmerising-photos-indias-disintegrating-archives>, accessed 20th July 2022.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Aweek Sen, "Sea of Files" in Dayanita Singh's *File Room*, Germany: Steidl (2013).

[5] Ibid.

[6] See Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: Rosetta Books (2007), pp. 39-64.

[7] Orhan Pamuk, "'Images you can smell' - novelist Orhan Pamuk on Dayanita Singh's mesmerising photos of India's disintegrating archives", *The Guardian* (20th June 2022). <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/jun/20/novelist-orhan-pamuk-dayanita-singhs-mesmerising-photos-indias-disintegrating-archives>, accessed 20th July 2022.

[8] Ribu and Raghu Karnad, "You'll Never See the Iconic Photo of the 'Afghan Girl' the Same Way Again", *The Wire* (12th March 2019). <https://thewire.in/media/afghan-girl-steve-mccurry-national-geographic>, accessed 20th July 2022.