

ARTSEEN

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Experiments with Truth: Gandhi and Images of Nonviolence

by Jonathan Fineberg

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Rarely in the hectic, increasingly commodified world of art today has a museum exhibition so successfully taken us to another place in our heads as did this show in Houston this winter. In it, the curators Josef Helfenstein and Joseph Newland provoked an intuitive discourse among a highly diverse collection of “art” and “not art” objects, films, documents, and images, filtered through the life and thought of Mohandas K. Gandhi. Rather than an argument, this exhibition created a meditative environment in which we encountered ourselves in a fresh way, through the trials of the human condition, across centuries and cultures and normative hierarchies. Instead of didactic labels, it immersed us in objects and images so thoughtfully installed that they nurtured our own unfolding as we sought personal meaning by being in the abundance of singular experiences, large and small, that filled the galleries. It was a different kind of exhibition.

The catalogue provides a foundation for exploring Gandhi’s ideas of tolerance, his vows of non-possession, truth, love, fearlessness, and his formulation of Satyagraha—non-violent resistance—as a vehicle of change and a paradigm for living. We learn about precursors



Some of Gandhi’s last possessions, ca. 1948 – 50.
Photographer Unknown. James Otis/GandhiServe.

such as Henry David Thoreau, John Ruskin, and Leo Tolstoy who inspired Gandhi; about fellow travelers like Abdul Ghaffar Khan who helped shape the history of India's independence; and about other historical figures—Florence Nightingale, Sojourner Truth, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and so many more—whose struggles enrich this expansive meditation on Gandhi's ideas. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela figure importantly as they applied the lessons of Gandhi to their battles against injustice, anticipating the ongoing struggles today in China, in the American inner city, and elsewhere.

This exhibition brought many stories, reflections, and images together with objects in a subjective totality. We somehow grasp right away why we are looking at the Dalai Lama and Aung San Suu Kyi alongside great works of abstraction like Barnett Newman's "Be I" (1949) and Yves Klein's 1961 "Hiroshima," as well as humble objects like the two pairs of sandals, the wooden spoons, the pocket watch which stopped at the moment Gandhi fell from the assassin's bullet, depicted in the anonymous photograph of Gandhi's last possessions that inspired this show.

The psychoanalyst Erik Erikson asks in his book on Gandhi: "What permits great men to step out of line?"¹ In *Experiments with Truth* we see that it is the necessity to creatively reorder the author's or the artist's or our own ordinary experience in fresh ways. We look at the simple beauty of an oxen yoke, an anonymous diagram by a self-taught artist of a man as the microcosm of the universe, and we see these things on a continuum with a seventh-century fragment from the Qur'an, Rembrandt's etching of "Christ Healing the Sick" ("The Hundred Guilder Print"), a transcendent ninth-century Buddha from the Heeramanek Collection, a hand-embroidered scarf (personalizing a uniform) from a World War II concentration camp. While no juxtaposition in this show could be called "typical," the simple but deeply resonant pairing of a life-size, headless Buddha from Thailand, made as an act of devotion more than a thousand years ago, with a video of a young pro-democracy demonstrator stepping in front of a column of tanks in Tiananmen Square during the violent government crackdown of June 1989 is the kind of experience we encounter again and again in this show. The smooth, utterly pacific stone Buddha holds up its hand, freezing time and motion, while the repetitive film clip creates the kind of visual paradox from which Zen monks learn to abandon a dependence on reason and find a higher order of enlightenment. In the next room, a large painting by Agnes Martin with a row of her drawings project her unyielding discipline, which in turn prompts us to think about the discipline of Gandhi's method.

Kimsooja's six-channel video projection, "A Needle Woman" (2005), takes the viewer from the anxiety of drowning in a sea of humanity to a meditative openness that embraces its complexity. The artist shows herself from the back, swallowed up by waves of people flowing toward and

around her. She set herself in the most crowded cities (Shanghai, Delhi, Cairo, New York, Lagos), and in sites of conflict (Jerusalem, N'Djamena in Chad, Sana'a in Yemen, Rio de Janeiro) to experience the emotions of poverty, violence, post-colonialism, civil war, and religious conflict as a kind of bodily reality. Kimsooja tells us:

I came to a street in Shibuya where hundreds of thousands of people were passing like waves of a human ocean ebbing and flowing. I couldn't walk anymore and had to stop right there and be still in order to tame the inner scream accumulating in my body from the energy of all the people ... Standing still, creating a contradictory position against the flow of the pedestrians, like a needle or an axis, I observed and contemplated their passing, weaving through and against my body ... The presence of my body seemed to be gradually erased by the crowd. Simultaneously, my sustained immobility was leading me toward a state of peace and balance in my mind, and I passed through the state of tension between the self and others—and reached a point at which I could bring and breathe others into my own body and mind.²

Instead of immersing oneself, as Kimsooja does, Amar Kanwar's poetic film, *A Season Outside* (1997), steps back in a pointedly non-judgmental examination of the spectacle of human conflict. Overlaid with thoughts on violent and nonviolent resistance, including texts by Gandhi, read by the artist, this 30-minute film provides what Helfenstein called a "centerpiece" to the exhibition. "Filmed in different locations in India," it includes:

The daily militaristic ritual of the opening and the closing at one crossing on the Pakistan-India border, a train bursting with travelers slowly moving through the heavily guarded border zone, episodes of violence among animals, historical footage of Gandhi visiting villages devastated by communal violence, and scenes of raging Chinese police brutality against monks in Tibet.

This exhibition addresses an open-ended system of relations in an encompassing conceptual environment. Michel Foucault spoke of a "thoroughly heterogenous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid," which create meaning.³ That is the state of mindfulness, which overtakes the viewer in this show. The vast array of discrete elements flows seamlessly through the galleries.

Experiments with Truth proposes a style of meeting the world—gently, openly finding one's place within it. What's at stake in such an exhibition is like what Ralph Ellison's protagonist in *Invisible Man* says about his underground room:

The point now is that I found a home [...] full of light. I doubt if there is a brighter spot in all New York than this hole of mine. [...] Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one's form is to live a death.⁴

NOTES

Erik Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), 113.

1. Kimsooja, "A Needle Woman," in Josef Helfenstein and Joseph N. Newland, eds., *Experiments with Truth: Gandhi and Images of Nonviolence* (Houston and New Haven: The Menil Collection and Yale University Press, 2014), 234.
2. Michel Foucault, "The Confession of the Flesh," a conversation, in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings 1972–1977* (N.Y.: Pantheon, 1980), 194.
3. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1995), 6 – 7.

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URL : <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2015/04/artseen/experiments-with-truth-apr-15>