

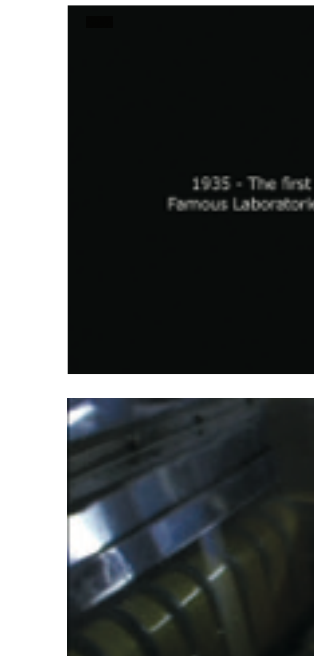
VIDEO VIGNETTES
SHORTS ON CINEMA
CITIZENRY

PROJECT CINEMA CITY

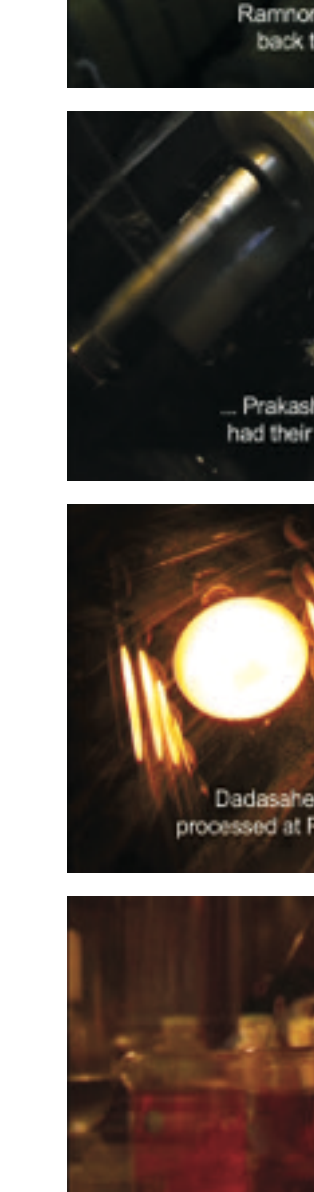
The frenetic pace and scale of filming in Bombay – of films on the city, films shot in the city, and also films merely impersonating the city's locations – make it a city more seen than lived-in. Such is the scale of over-representation that, it is believed, the lived-in city manages its love, grief and melancholy through cinematic analogies. Why then, within a project that aims, among other things, to cross the threshold of discourses on meanings of representations to modes of production of meaning, must we produce yet another set of films on Bombay?

While the city was always a desired location for the track of sensorial stories of modernity in fiction films, the rubric of truth and the real had, for a long time, relegated documentary films to the hinterland. Colonial anthropology first, then the post-independence nation-making agendas and after that independent documentaries, looked for the real India outside contrived and hybrid urbanity, driven by the conviction that uncontaminated truth is to be found only in horizontal pastoral landscapes or picturesque hilly terrains. Even among the documentaries that worked exclusively on and in urban locations, most concentrated on the loss and fragmentation one needs to endure in order to be in the city – leaving behind the wholeness of life in the non-urban location of *gaon* ('native place'). So, in a large number of documentary works made in independent India, cityscapes were shot mainly to provide a context for rural India, or the real India. Till the late 1970s the city hardly got any documentary on its own right, and, in a broad disciplinary sense, urbanity was not adequately represented in documentary films. The situation changed only in the 1980s, when aggressive urbanization and development plans brought various sociological discourses to the foreground, and when a second generation of the industrial population, born in the city, turned adult. Only then were the testimonies of urban citizens that are primarily about the city they live in, and not about the home they left behind, documented. The *Video Vignettes of Project Cinema City* were planned against this background.

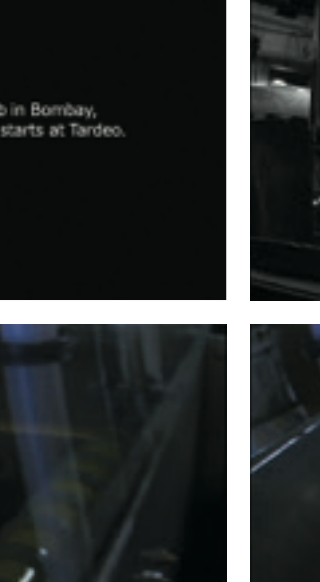
These shorts were envisaged as video portraits of the citizenry of cinema city where the filmmakers and their subjects are co-protagonists. The filmmakers, with their precariously balanced placement in the film industry, are a part of the citizenry as much as the themes they pursue in their films. This reciprocal relationship was not overtly formalized by standard conventions such as writing oneself into the film or employing first-person narrative; instead, it was woven into the films through the central enquiry of each filmmaker. The exercise was not to challenge the regime of representation but to observe the regime from the vantage position of a neighbour.



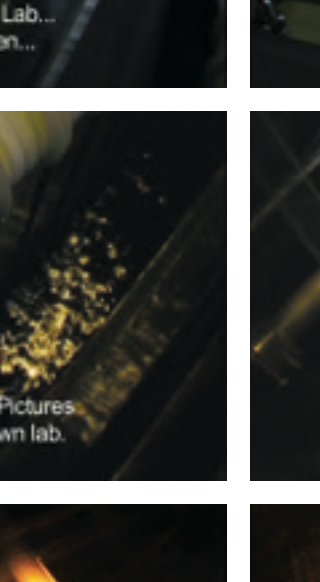
1935 - The first lab in Bombay,
Famous Laboratories starts at Tardeo.



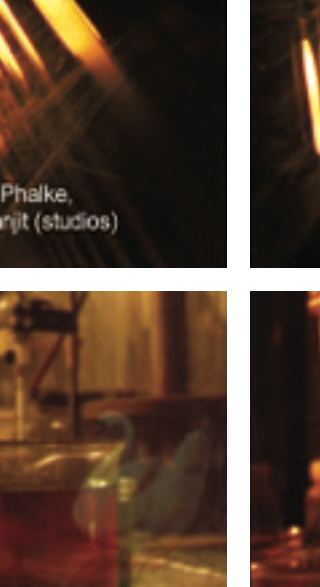
Famous Laboratories...
...Tardeo




Ramrod Lab...
back then...




...was started in a godown
at Elphinstone Road.



Rajkamal had their
own lab...



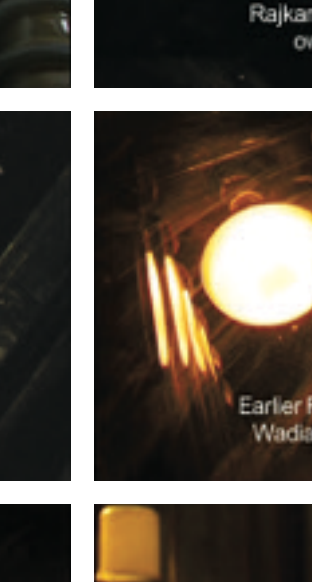
... Prakash Pictures
had their own lab.



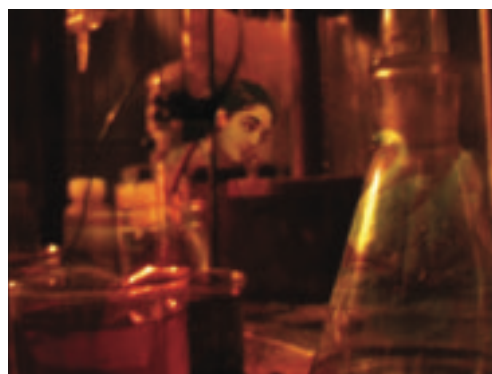
Earlier Rajkamal was
Wadia Movietone.

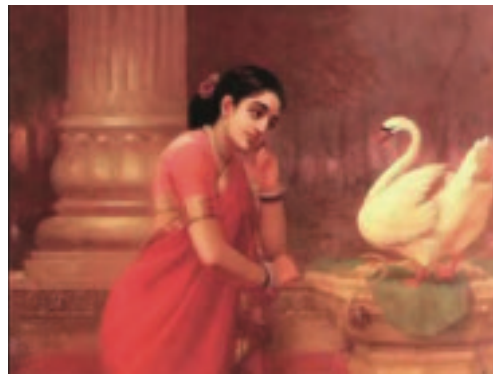
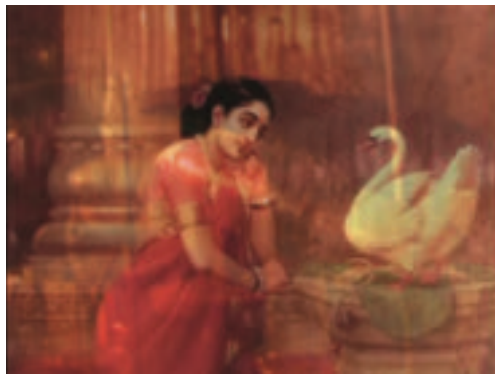


Dadasahed Phalke,
processed at Ranjit (studios)



Ranjit had its
own lab.



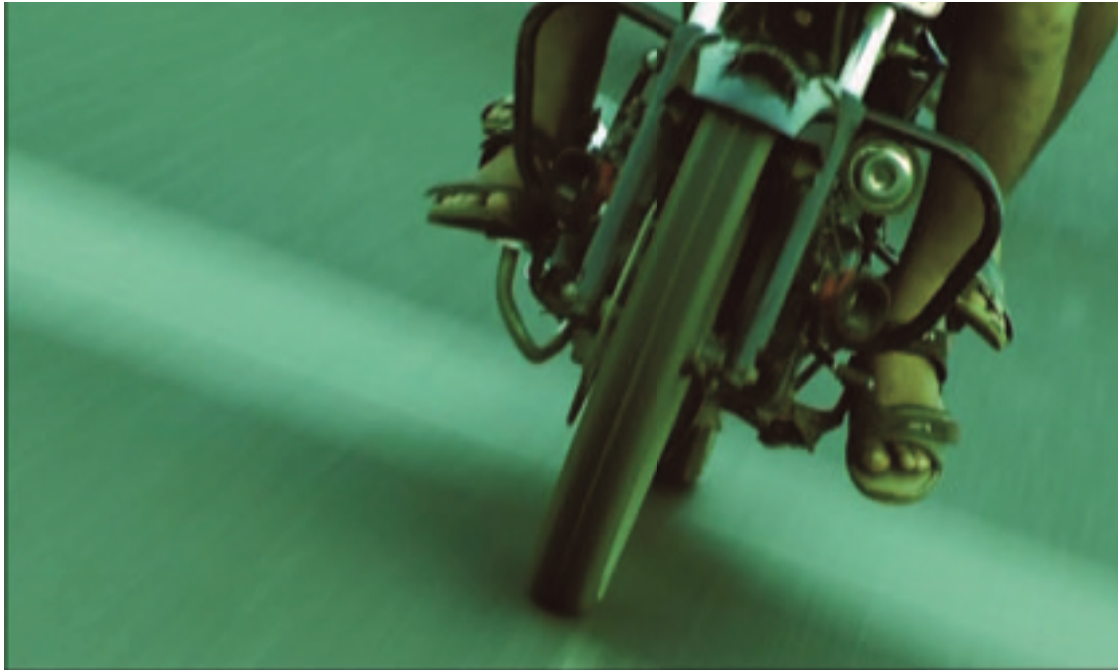


DARKROOM

DIR. RENU SAVANT

15 MINUTES, MAJLIS & PSBT PRODUCTION, 2009

Renu Savant, the maker of *Darkroom*, is a film student who is currently absorbed in the intricacies of chemicals and moving images in the history of cinema. The displacement she experienced between the digital eruption all around her and the archaic syllabus of the film school set her on a journey to look for the fading marks of chemicals in the body of the city that produced printed celluloid on an industrial scale for a whole century. The chemical that activates the latent celluloid image and the light that illuminates visibility, in Savant's rendering, find a metaphor in the city-lights beaming on sea-water in the port / cinema city of Bombay, that allegorically brings to the shore and takes back all that is imagined, produced and stored to signify urbania.



For *Sin City*, Shrikant Agawane, a 'native' of the city, ventured forth looking for the genesis of the mythology of the criminal underworld that is associated with the cinema city. He visited locations that are often seen in Bombay's noir cinema – Dharavi, Darukhana, creeks and beaches, chawls and youth clubs – and yet made them unfamiliar by contriving the optical values of the shots. The trajectory of crime that evolved through various livelihood practices and survival strategies, and then got spectacularized through cinematic representation, is actually situated in the topology of the everyday city and its network of goods and services. Agawane, a fresh film school graduate, felt the need to re-present these locations over and above existing portrayals. In order to destabilize his own and his audience's familiarity with the over-represented city, he converted these everyday locations into a fairyland by coding them with an over-saturated green of comic-book hue. Between the high realism of the interview tracks and the fairyland visuals, he places the filmography of the city in a realm that is simultaneously a tale, told and to be told (borrowing from Trinh T Minh-ha in *When the Moon Waxes Red*).

SIN CITY

DIR. SHRIKANT AGAWANE
16 MINUTES, MAJLIS & PSBT PRODUCTION,
2009





Rafique Baghdadi is a connoisseur, a collector and an archivist of films and the city of Bombay. In this city of hyper-transiency and a high rate of erasure, Rafique is one of the islands that stores memories and memorabilia; he fights the massive cleansing drives in public places by taking the rubble and remnants home. Walking the city with him, the film *Do Rafique* and its director, senior photographer Rafeeq Ellias, stumble upon those forgotten locations that have withstood the frenzy of development – to such an extent that they have begun to look like a new city, another city, even a very cinematic city with deep facial lines and wrinkles on its body. Thus, in the absence of official memorials (Bombay still does not have a film museum), the city itself turns into a display of living memorabilia.

DO RAFIQUE

DIR. RAFEEQ ELLIAS

13 MINUTES, MAJLIS & PSBT PRODUCTION,
2009



Film school graduates who live and function on the fringes of popular filmhood, by choice or by compulsion, were invited to take part in the next segment of the project. The Vignettes here together create an album of notes and observations by individuals who are insiders yet not embedded in the various configurations that make or unmake the cinema city. The filmmakers' own training, aspirations/disappointments and curiosity regarding the mechanics of cinema in the city informed their choice of the forms and scope of the films. The attempt was to stay away from the fetishistic queries of anthropological discourse as well as micro-narratives on popular culture, but instead to collate a set of video-notes on the order of things in their occupational spheres and the filmmakers' own emotional engagement with these. Hence the structure of actions that take place in the cinema city – the systems of viewing, the locations and logistics of image-making, the architectures of aspiration – became the main ingredients of this set of films.

Madhavi Tangella, a city-bred filmmaker, looked for niches and crevices in the city where its ghost-citizens – migrant wage workers who speak an alien tongue – purchase cinematic entertainment for themselves. Her language affinity with Telugu-speaking construction workers took her to a shanty cinema that caters to their need to hear the sound of their language, which is hushed in the parochial climate of the city, loud and clear. But during the filming, as if in reciprocity, that exclusively male domain of shanty cinema and its viewers treated the upper-class female filmmaker of Bombay with the same indifference and invisibility to which they are subjected in the world outside. Like the Telugu/s spoken by the filmmaker and the migrant workers, their cinemas and longings too are different and distinct.

ANNA SOUND PLEASE

DIR. MADHAVI TANGELLA

16 MINUTES, MAJLIS PRODUCTION, 2010







CERTIFIED UNIVERSAL

DIR. AVIJIT MUKUL KISHORE

15 MINUTES, MAJLIS & PSBT PRODUCTION, 2009



In *Certified Universal*, Avijit Mukul Kishore – a cinematographer-turned-filmmaker with an articulated interest in experimental films and videos – argues the legitimacy of his own choice by opening up access to image-making to citizens of all registers. The professed death of motion pictures can be bypassed by freeing images from the industrial grip on their production process – towards an ever-expanding plurality of many images, many image makers, many spectators and many ways of viewing. In his argument, even those who have never seen a celluloid film are valid citizens of the cinema city by virtue of existing in absentia. In his search for the true spectator, the cinematographer–filmmaker reaches a point where he reinvents and conjures up numerous reflections and magnifications of his own self, in as many image makers / spectators.

Documentary filmmaking is passing through one of its most exciting phases in the digital era. The effect of digital technology on the mainstay of documentary – documents, evidence, testimonies – has thus far been iconoclastic. As copy and original, imaginary and real, declaration and dialogue get mixed up in stored digital data that have been recorded with diligent equality, documentary filmmaking is freed from the moral duty of having to deal with facts that reveal the truth. Contemporary documentary practices are becoming more pluralistic in their attempts to deal with this challenge. One of the emerging strategies is to problematize the role of memory in retracing history by accommodating the individual's prerogative to perform the self. In performance of the self, lived-in memory gets laced with desire insinuated out of lived experience. By allowing this desire to seep into memory, the testimonies turn less factual but more truthful to the protagonist's specifics within the generic theme. In this methodology, the truth is to be arrived at through the protagonist's performance of the contemporary self within forward-looking desire and memories of the past. The methodology is a documentary practice in the sense that the documents are to be rewritten at every turn of history with active participation from the subjects of the historical quest. This also helps in evolving a mechanism to not bury the protagonist/subject under the temporality and logistics of documentation.

In *Video Vignettes*, these two apparently opposing agendas – the individual as an observer of 'little things and shifts' around one's own location, and protagonists/subjects who are facilitated to mix factual testimonies with desires and imaginations – come together to create a transient scape of cinema citizenry.

A night watchman who has been waiting fifteen years to be elevated to the life of a script-writer begins the film with a rendering that cannot be categorized as either testimony or story-telling:

The Almighty tosses a coin at us, from up above ... about three or four hours past midnight. By then the cars are out, flights have taken off, some are coming by bus, some in luxury transports, many more by tempos. ... So, the city bustles into activity even before dawn. Oh! There's a tinkle! What fell? Go for it ... and everyone goes hunting. ... We are all searching for this coin. Where is it? I haven't yet found it ... maybe tomorrow. The coin keeps tinkling, and there's always hope...

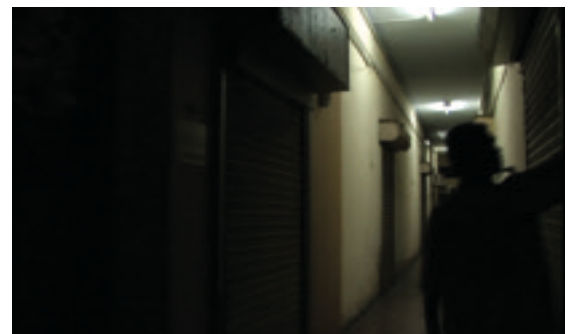
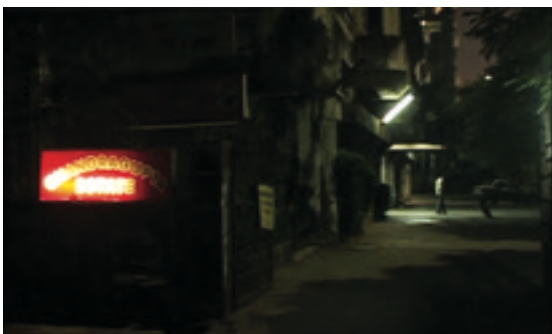
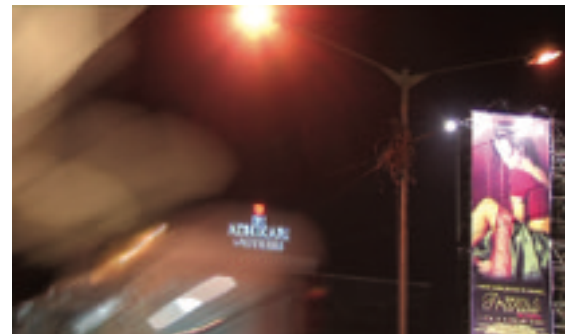
This sound-byte borders on his desperate aspiration and his natural ability to view life around him as a piece of fiction, or even as a performance ritual as in *Bhakti*. Rivu Laha, the maker of Dhananjay Kulkarni 'Chandragupt', who is a migrant aspirant himself, albeit from a different class, filmed his protagonist in the depths of the night under streetlights – a zone where the boundaries between memory and desire, testimony and storytelling, citizenship and displacement, filmmaker and protagonist, collapsed into a chain of words and metaphors. In the course of many such meanderings through the strangely erotic, nocturnal cityscape, the insignificant migrant aspirant evolves, in front of our eyes, into a twenty-first-century ascetic: 'This city is a shadow, and we must breathe into the shadow to keep it alive.'

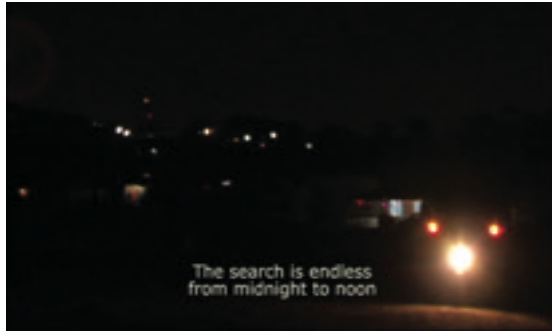
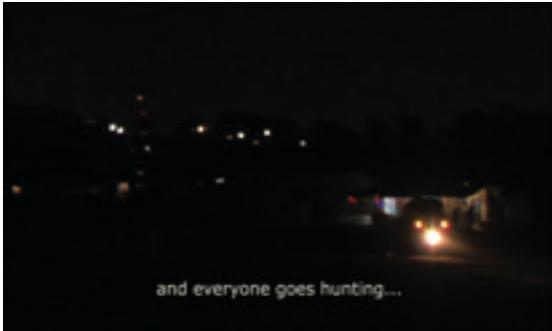
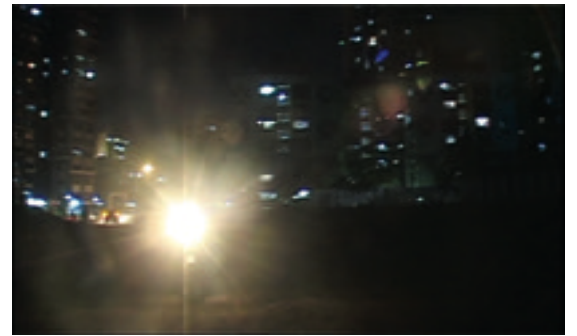
DHANANJAY KULKARNI 'CHANDRAGUPT'

DIR. RRIVU LAHA

11 MINUTES, MAJLIS & PSBT PRODUCTION, 2009







At the stroke of noon, one man quietly rouses...
He travels around the world by midnight.



The cinematic city gets another twist in Richa Hushing's film as its protagonist, who lives in Dharavi – the most sought-after location for the city's cinema, refuses to remain just a location and tries hard to acquire an agency within filmdom and in this documentary. He is a pedestrian version of the fundamental hybridity that cinema city produces – a fringe character who sells a mainland dream to people from a farther margin. The failed actor–director–producer runs a miscellaneous grooming centre for Bollywood aspirants from his cubbyhole of a home in the rickety bylanes of Dharavi. The mutual roles of director and protagonist in this film were often swapped due to Baburao's almost aggressive assertion of his agency.

DIRECTOR PAINTER SHRI BABURAO LAAD SAHEB

DIR. RICHA HUSHING

14 MINUTES, MAJLIS & PSBT PRODUCTION, 2010



HAVE YOU DREAMT CINEMA?

DIR. HANSA THAPLIYAL

16 MINUTES, MAJLIS & PSBT PRODUCITON, 2009

Hansa Thapliyal's brief was to make a film on gender, public culture and public place in the city. She turned the opportunity into a dialogue with neighbours living in close proximity to the cinema industry – on Film City Road. Through short and crisp flights into dense lanes and bylanes, broken hillocks and construction sites, shanty towns and demolished movie halls, her filmmaking practice crisscrossed with the livelihood practices of women from other classes, who are as far as can be from the adrenalin-driven world of cinema. Yet these lives that run along parallel tracks with no apparent synchrony, when laid together, created a cartography of a location that lies right under the chimneys of the dream factory (Film City, the largest open-air studio in Mumbai) and yet far away from the final product – considered by the protagonists to be export material. The other women's (un)location in the trajectory of cinema contrapuntally created a context and simultaneously erected a boundary for the filmmaker.

Groomed in the angst-ridden history of the country in terms of the real and its images – from colonial anthropology to manipulation by war interests; the nation-building mandate of state productions to investigative expositions of state atrocities; the high morality and fixed anti-position of radical politics to the somewhat self-conscious transplantation of western avant-gardism; attempting to position little histories on the map to evolving the language of documentary through interfaces with other art forms; anti-politics and anti-theory activism to appropriation within the worlds of television infotainment and digital euphoria – the documentary as a genre has developed many dialects which have always been interrogated. The contestation between intention and form within the practice of documentary filmmaking has been dense and vocal – to the extent that each form is eventually forced to open a window of dissent within its own methodology. The fact that documentary viewing is always an act of suspicion – is it true, how is the truth culled, is the truth adequately substantiated – has additionally resulted in keeping its styles and structures under tight scrutiny. Moreover, as the notion of truth itself changes with alterations in social configurations, so does the perception of a truth-revealing documentary. Thus not only is the practice of documentary plural, but even perceptions of documentaries are transient.

The contestation, the scrutiny, the suspicion and the vacillating regime of truth work towards making documentary practices agile and more temporal than their solvent cousin, fiction cinema. *Video Vignettes* was an exercise to employ apparatuses that have evolved through the documentary's brush with various temporalities, to disintegrate the monolithic façade of popular cinema. In this project, the triangle of the location of the city, the apparatus of documentary and the effect of popular cinema attempts to evolve a retroactive manifesto for the making of the public in the city of Bombay/Mumbai.





