IF NOT FOR YOUR STRUGGLE

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Phil Coldiron

The camera—evidently handheld by its occasional wobble—points upwards, slightly, to take in a row of palm trees behind a mess of electrical lines. The composition's right half is filled by a fluttering curtain, mauve, vermillion, and indigo, so thin as to be transparent when blown flat. Text, small and white, appears in the centre of the screen. First: "How do I begin to write that I would not be here—". Then: "—if not for your struggle?" We are, by this point, halfway through Suneil Sanzgiri's *An Impossible Address*, and know by now who the second person refers to. Still, the odd, specific phrasing raises certain questions and ideas, about presence and absence, image and language, poetry and plain speech, politics and personal relation, that get at the heart of this densely woven filmic document of anti-colonial action across generations and continents.

"How do I begin to write that I would not be here—" To start, this opening is itself enjambed, broken after "write," leaving us with a pair of implicit questions depending on where one reads the stress as falling: "*How* do I begin to write" and "How *do* I begin to write." The former, I'll suggest, is a question of theory; the latter, one of praxis. Theory and practice seem to me apt as interpretive lenses for *An Impossible Address*, given its concern with the revolutionary and the militant. The subsequent line, however, completes its tonal range by introducing the overtly lyric, speculative and subjunctive: "that I would not be here."

The question's conclusion, given a frame to itself—a cine-poetic stanza break, of sorts—at once concretises its meaning while opening onto deeper concerns. This question, along with the entire film, is addressed to Sita Valles, an Angolan communist militant of Goan heritage, murdered at the age of twenty-five by the same regime that she had only months earlier fought alongside to overthrow the country's imperial Portuguese government. Valles was brilliant, chic, and ruthlessly committed to her principles. She is an ideal of the century's last gasps of revolutionary optimism, of the final moments when it seemed—as her brother Edgar remarks in Sanzgiri's *Two Refusals (Would We Recognize Ourselves Unbroken?)*—that "it was possible to change the world, and to get a new world." She's the sort of figure whose inspiration might make those depths of revolutionary conviction available to someone like Sanzgiri, born a decade after her death into a world where the possibility of an order beyond capitalism and imperialism was at an ebb, where history was being rushed offstage. Put another way, caring for her struggle and memory becomes a personal and political responsibility capable of shaping an entire subjectivity, of making Sanzgiri's "I" into something that allows him to recognize himself as himself, as the artist and activist he had to become. This is, to state the obvious, an enormously profound admixture of proximity and distance. How, indeed, could he possibly begin writing this? And how could he ever stop? Of course, the film does have to start somewhere: views of Luanda at night from a speeding car, an undercranked camera accentuating the bumpiness of rough roads and smearing the city into streaks of light. Then, on foot moving through dark alleys towards an obscure destination, the first passage of onscreen text appears: "Sita, I began writing to you because language, even in all its limits, makes it possible to speak to the dead."

If language makes this possible, why does the film's title imply otherwise? Does language allow us to engage the dead in a manner that other forms of communication—for instance filmic—don't? Well, yes; there is something language has that moving images don't, or at least don't yet, and that's a grammar of the second person. Film is addressed to the audience in front of it; however large or small that crowd might be, it will never include the dead. The dynamic Sanzgiri builds out here between his use of language and his use of cinema does something strange though, which I take to be foundational to the political dimension of his form: he creates a situation in which each viewer is obliged to watch *as if they are Sita*; to use an appropriately ghostly metaphor, to see and hear *through* her. The result leaves every member of the audience obliged at once to reflect on their relationship to this (imaginary) role and to wonder how she might receive this film that's been addressed to her.

If this political uncanny is something new, it nonetheless flows directly out of Sanzgiri's preceding work, which has consistently used language as a centre of gravity, as a means of drawing his wide-ranging visual style into coherence. Sanzgiri's use of the epistolary to speak to the dead in *An Impossible Address* is an expansion, the impossible address to Sita just a turn on the letter, written to a distant relative, the communist politician and journalist Prabhakar Sanzgiri, and read by his father, in *Letter From Your Far-Off Country*: "There's a mythology to everything, to one's history, to one's land, and to one's family." Early on in that film, Sanzgiri writes, and his father says: "This letter will never reach you." In both cases—Prabhakar's and Sita's—it's true on some level, but then, they were both revolutionary believers in historical materialism, which in its most serious sense entails a longue durée struggle that carries through generations. Sanzgiri's achievement is in sounding and showing the resonance of their action past the time scales of their lives.

It's gratifying, in an era that often sees artists tending towards either rote repetition or desperate reinvention, to watch Sanzgiri methodically refine the technical and conceptual tendencies he's dwelt on over the last decade. His weaving of numerous formats—16mm, both straight and heavily processed; HD photography; archival footage; digital animation—has never been more fluid and deft. Often the personal is invoked as a means of merely accessing wider histories, but Sanzgiri's ongoing formal efforts take a binocular vision. His oeuvre does not simply use the personal as a portal, but shows that it's possible to put personal and global history in productive, ongoing conversation.

This text was commissioned by Open City Documentary Festival to accompany the programme TWO REFUSALS (2024; dir. Suneil Sanzgiri) + AN IMPOSSIBLE ADDRESS (2025; dir. Suneil Sanzgiri) at Institute of Contemporary Arts, 18 April 2026.

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