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STILL LIFE National Reflex 2000 – the story of an aborted camera

Paramita Ghosh

paramitaghosh@hindustantimes.com

Abandoned houses can have no secrets. If you are looking. In 2009, when photographers Madhuban Mitra and Manas Bhattacharya entered India's first and only still camera factory in Kolkata to capture its ruins, what they found before them were a mass of objects.

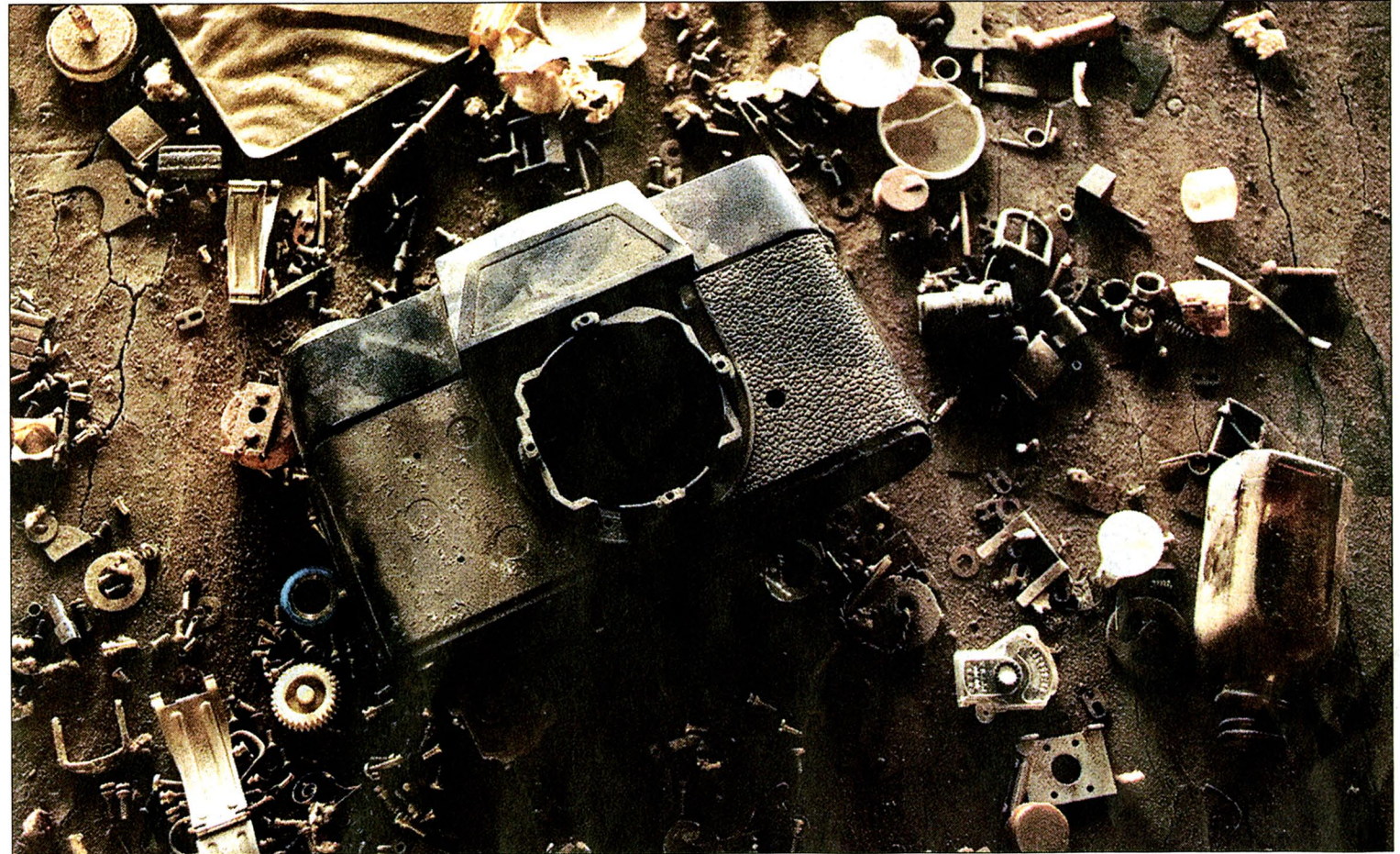
Lopsided switchboards. Wires. Broken mirrors. Dusty arrears' files. Soviet literature. Hanging overalls. Love letters. Camera parts... It helped them piece together the story of slow death of The National Instruments Ltd, a central government PSU, and imagine the worker at his table as his life fell apart in the 80s.

And many things died in the Eighties. The Nehruvian vision of self-reliance. The drive to build industry to cater to local needs. "Other than the National 35

camera, the factory made other things — land survey equipments, night-vision binoculars for the Army," says Mitra. "When the Army gave away its contracts to a Swedish company, it lost crores. As with the textiles industry, a lot of this story is about internal sabotage."

The National 35 was a fixed lens camera. At the time of shutdown, the factory's R&D department was developing the National Reflex 2000, India's first 'people's camera' so to speak. It was low-end, for the amateur, but an improvement on the 35. It would not have fixed lenses and it would be indigenously produced. "We talked to a worker who had been laid off. He had been trained in Germany and had made the camera unit in Kolkata operational," says Madhuban. "But we didn't want him to stand for portraits."

The exhibition, *Through a Lens, Darkly*, at the Photoink gallery, brings him back in this artful disappearance.



■ A camera shell of National Reflex 2000, which would have been India's first SLR camera. A still from the Photoink exhibition on view till February 12, 2011



■ Photographers Madhuban Mitra and Manas Bhattacharya captured 'time' in the factory through objects. They worked on the project from June-November 2009.



■ "The character of this industrial space in the 80s was different. Here were workers who were working in a factory for years so they tried to make it their personal space," says Mitra



■ The premises of National Instruments Ltd in Jadavpur, Kolkata, is now a property of the Jadavpur University and will soon be open for science and management classes