

# domus

India

Volume 7 | Issue 11 | October 2018 / ₹200

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**Cover Design:**

The design on the cover seeks inspiration from the drawings of Zaha Hadid, featured in this issue in 'The Legacy of Zaha Hadid' (page 82). From the explosive fragmentation of sharp, pointed forms to the organic and enveloping curves of her later works, an unpredictable path is spawned by the gestural expressiveness of drawing.

Contents

With this issue, *Domus* in India completes a good seven years. This may be an important moment to evaluate what these pages, over the last 77 issues, have aimed to do – and that has been to calibrate the contemporary. With architecture and design at the centre, the magazine has attempted to map the larger world of cultural ideas and productions and the measure of politics that sits within design and art, our cities and the environment. Contemporary architecture was slowly lost (to the limit of being forgotten) in the debates on urbanism and development, real estate and conservation, sustainability and history; *Domus India* took on the mantle of bringing architecture back to the centre of all conversations. Clearly one was not looking at architecture as a floating object – ready and cut for a kind of ‘object-study’ – but it was an object-subject that sat at many crossroads, and the crossroads had to be accounted for but only through the object-subject they were all crossing – that of architecture.

There has indeed been a change of atmosphere towards a recovery of architecture as the subject of discourse and subsequent architecture-oriented biographies. Rahul Mehrotra’s *Architecture in India since 1990* (Pictor Publishing Pvt Ltd, 2011) also marked this important moment of proposing lenses to look at the contemporary practice of architecture, the crafted object, and the histories of the subject that have a bearing on the contemporary. Thereafter, *State of Architecture: Practices and Processes in India*, curated by Rahul Mehrotra, Ranjit Hoskote and Kaiwan Mehta (under the aegis of UDRI) in 2016 brought architecture at the centrestage within the profession as well as amongst other professionals,

thinkers and citizens. This was coupled with a range of publications that emerged in the span of the last 2-3 years – monographs such as those on the works of Mumbai-based I M Kadri, Ahmedabad-based Hasamukh Patel, or the master A P Kanvinde, or Pune-based Christopher Benninger, and recently Mumbai-based Brinda Somaya. Two other publications that came about this period – two books accounting the story of women and architecture, as well as women in architecture – were books by University of Cornell professor Mary Woods and Ahmedabad-based Madhavi Desai. The archives of *Domus India* were, in fact, presented as a map of contemporary architecture practice in India at a conference on the same theme at the Faculty of Architecture, Cornell University, about two years ago. And *Domus India* is happy and proud to be part of this process and change; the team and archives played a key role in two landmark exhibitions – *State of Architecture: Practices and Processes in India* as well as *State of Housing: Aspirations, Imaginaries, and Realities in India* (2018).

To map the contemporary has been a methodology beyond the obvious documenting, critically, the works and buildings produced in India. It has been a larger project of mapping the cultural scenario of the present time as much as of the time-past, so drawing out archives or conversations, books and exhibitions from the past has been crucial. These pages have observed closely and invited reflections and discussions on music, poetry, art, literature, cinema, and other forms of cultural production and practice. In fact with this issue, we complete a year – a cycle of 12 episodes – of the poetry section, with poet, critic and cultural theorist Ranjit Hoskote as the consulting curator for the section.

The contemporary is the active space of making and thinking, constantly in a state of flux and review, of production and re-drawing... and to measure this pulse – the many states of transition and formation, as well as un-shaping – was a crucial task for these pages. One has always hoped that the pages of the magazine are a library of time in motion, and a mirror to the states of time in transition as well as shaping material and ideological worlds.

The contemporary in India is of crucial importance, not only because this is the political and social context we live and work in today, but because in many ways, it represents the turns and shifts in the world at large. The contemporary is not as a set of events in India, but as a set of unmapped happenings, the impulses to produce material worlds within this subcontinent, the upheavals in economics and political scenarios, are all putting us in testing times, and to measure and map these through architecture and design has indeed been a fascinating and revealing journey. We hope to carry on with this journey, through further reflections and interactions with scholars and thinkers, who contribute to these pages in various ways, helping expand the discourse on aesthetics and love, humanity and design, vanity and history – drawing in not only from the world of architecture but also poetry, cinema, literature, art and much more.

A recent exhibition by photographer Ronny Sen features images of the coal fire that has been burning in Jharia – a coal-mining town in Jharkhand – since the early 1900s, as well as the unethical and unsustainable mining practices that continue in the area till today. The artist looks deeply into the current issue of environmental degradation that has made life almost unliveable in some parts of the world

Text by Christopher Pinney  
Photos by Ronny Sen

The Jharia coalfire, the subject of Ronny Sen's series *Fire Continuum* has been burning since 1916. Coal extraction for coking mills started in 1894 and by 1930, two 2600-foot deep shafts had collapsed as the result of fire. Since then the fire has inexorably spread outwards and upwards, producing the apocalyptic mise-en-scène for the performance of the tragedy that Ronny Sen evokes in his series of images, which in an earlier iteration, and book publication, were given the significant title *End of Time*. The viewer of these ethereal and disturbing images, made in 2014, seeing them in our current year of the unfolding worldwide climate emergency, will be left with a paradoxical sense of continuity and intensification, of a climacteric which has been flashing warning lights for many decades of, as the new title has it, a fire-continuum.

This century-long history announces, then, another paradox: time has not ended, for the burning continues in the coalfields. *End of Time* announces a paradox akin to 'post-apocalyptic'. There is no rupture, no 'beyond' or stasis; there is continuity. Indeed, one might think of this as the *fruition* of time, a culmination of a long process. In Jharia, the culmination entails the breaking through to ground level of fires that have burned deep below for decades, a continuum between the ancient fossilised energy of coal and its now unstoppable conflagration. Globally the culmination is the fruiting of the

anthropocene with its wildfires, record temperatures, dust storms, bleaching coral, and parched earth.

There is a third paradox, something highly unusual, in using photography to record this temporal puzzle. Photography is usually marked by the contingency of the temporal event of its making, the 'there-then' which leaves copious time-specific evidence in the 'here now' of our viewing of the image, a double temporality wonderfully captured in a caption used by Roland Barthes to describe a photograph of a soon-to-be-executed assassin: "He is dead *and* he is going to die". To this sense of the camera's temporal specificity we might add a material and spatial one: photography usually provides a mathematically and optically ordered 'screen' in which off-screen space can be as important as what is shown. Photography thus, commonly involves a manifestation, or materialisation, a concreteness of time and space.

And yet what Ronny Sen offers is a not the documentation of the precise moment when time ends but a sense of the endlessness of a time that has unravelled, a time that has un-moored itself from ordinary events and duration, a time that is no longer connected in obvious material ways to the space in which it unfolds.

This helps make sense of one of the key features of *Fire Continuum*: its 'refusal' of the conventional default settings of photography, especially of its optical acuity and sense of spatial anchorage. In part this reflects the nature of the disaster:

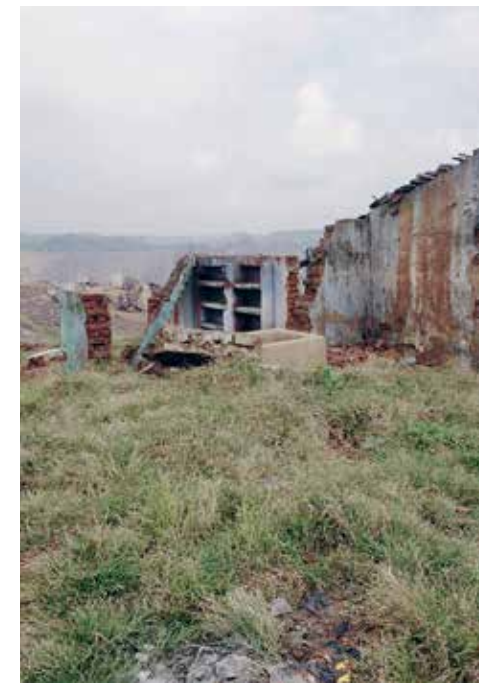
the fires are so extensive that they disorder and re-sculpt landscapes hour-by-hour. There is no stable topography for the camera to record: the co-ordinates are always on the move. There is something peculiarly dream-like about this sequence. Not obviously nightmarish (although it is clearly horrifying) because that would too reductive. It is, rather, deliberately and decisively oneiric, capacious and open, showing how images might perform when no longer imprisoned in specific times and places, and when no longer required to precisely *signify*. The Jharia landscape in *Fire Continuum* is abstract, allegorical, like the modernist staging of a Greek Tragedy, or a Brechtian dramaturgy that knows that less is more.

The contingency and specificity of photography that is surrendered in *Fire Continuum* gives way to what Aristotle in the *Poetics* called *Opsis*. *Opsis* was first used by Aristotle to denote the "final element of tragedy". *Opsis*, in Aristotle's very brief treatment of it, suggests the role of masks and other visual effects deployed in the service of the object of the drama in front of a bare stage. *Opsis* indicates what was seen rather than what was explained, and might be seen to prefigure Lyotard's distinction between 'figure' and 'discourse'.

*Opsis* takes on a fuller life in Antonin Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*, which provides a model for thinking further about *End of Time*. Artaud appropriated two of Aristotle's six elements of Tragedy



## A Way Into the Future: Optics of Cruelty



and opposed them to a third. *Opsis* (spectacle) and *Melos* (sound) - which for Aristotle were the two least important aspects of Tragedy - were opposed to *Lexis* (language). Efficacy was relocated away from 'meaning' and 'plot' towards something more elemental and performative. Artaud, used gesture, image, sound and lighting, to shock his audience, believing that allegory was more powerful than what he termed the "lucidities of speech". "That is why" Artaud wrote in a seminal text of the 1930s "in the 'theatre of cruelty' the spectator is in the middle and the spectacle surrounds him. In this spectacle, sound effects are constant: sounds, noises, cries are chosen first for their vibratory quality, then for what they represent". Jharia abounds with Artaudian effects such as the deafening warning sirens that announce blasting before the landscape erupts as young coal-pickers desperately flee from the showering rocks that pound the ground around them. This precarity without a parent narrative or 'plot'. Accordingly, *Fire Continuum* aims not for mere representation, not for the material temporal and spatial co-ordinates of Jharia, but for some "vibratory quality", like an emergency siren, located in another plane.

The earlier, alternative title for this series, *End of Time* puts me in mind of the *kaliyuga*, the present era of decayed and apocalyptic modernity. I say this not because I want to lazily fit (in an Orientalising or essentialising spirit) the work of an Indian photographer concerned with time to some hand-me-down local cultural theory, but because the question of time, industry, fire,

and the 'end', are all very familiar concepts from my first attempt to conduct fieldwork in a heavily polluted industrial town in Madhya Pradesh. In that location the Sanskrit concept of *kaliyuga* was commonly vernacularised as *kalyug*, the *yug* of machinery and industry. It was intimately linked to the exploitation of the earth and involved visions of fire, smoke, death, and the end of current time.

*Kalyug* seems an apposite concept with which to unpick Sen's series because of this echoing constellation of ideas about an industrial exploitation gone bad. But it also resonates through its imagination of time because although having a very precise temporal limit (it will end with *pralay*, the dissolution of the world in 427,000 years time) in practice it is the only time in which living humans have ever lived and will live. It is the final element in a four-part theory of what is formally 'cyclical time' but which, in practice, is avowedly linear. The experience of *kalyug* is akin to that of an ant traversing a vast globe: from a theoretical distance it is cyclical, but subjectively it is linear, and endless.

Looking back and forth over the translucent, almost archetypal and emblematic images of this extraordinary cruel and viscous landscape, one is stopped short, almost with a jolt by a (to my eyes) sardonic photograph near the beginning of the series that depicts a white Hindustan Ambassador at the absolute centre of a dead, heavy, landscape. Sen explains that this car, used by mine officials, would arrive each morning at 10am and its presence would cause the

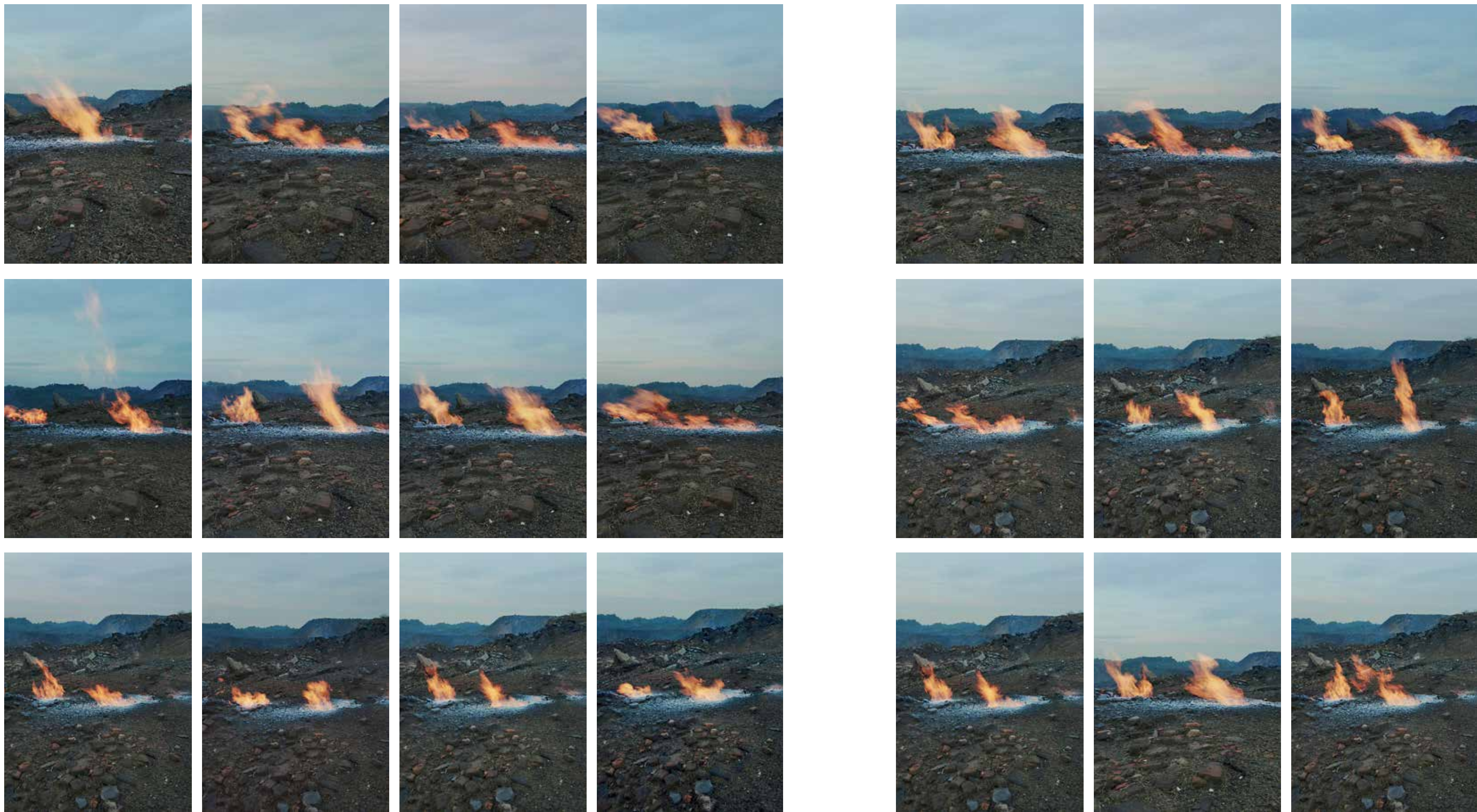
coal pickers who start scavenging from 4:30am to scatter. The white car symbolised the *babus*, those who had ruined the landscape and who still had the power to make things even worse for those forced to subsist within it. Many viewers are likely to think of the red Ambassador that featured in Raghbir Singh's celebrated *A Way Into India*. Singh's car was both a literal vehicle, a means of travelling into the terrain he was investigating but also became a framing device whose doors, windows and mirrors became props in the picturing of India. The architecture of the car became a means of segmenting, fracturing, and visually duplicating elements with his photographs: a *way of seeing*. *A Way Into India* was perhaps quintessential Raghbir Singh, deploying a superficial modernism to deliver images which, while not simply a tourist itinerary, were nevertheless populated with many exotic pleasures.

The lonely white Ambassador in Ronny Sen's series helps us understand that his accomplishment is not so much to provide a way into Jharia, since his images eschew the specific temporal and spatial precision of much photography. He clearly uses his camera to provide a different pathway, a way into the future, which is not only India's, a future that has already begun, and which has no end.

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All images © Ronny Sen  
 From the series Fire Continuum  
 Signed and dated verso  
 Archival pigment print  
 In an Edition of 8 + 1 Artist Proof  
 9 x 6.75 inches (each)  
 2014

Fire Continuum by Ronny Sen was on display  
 at TARO, Mumbai, from 23 August to  
 29 September 2018. The text and  
 photographs in this feature have been  
 published with the permission of the gallery  
 and the author.

