

Moulting Skin, Growing Hands

Photography is borrowing from sculpture, painting, fiction and cinema to create an expanded field. **Shweta Upadhyay** reports about contemporary Indian photographers and their new interventions.

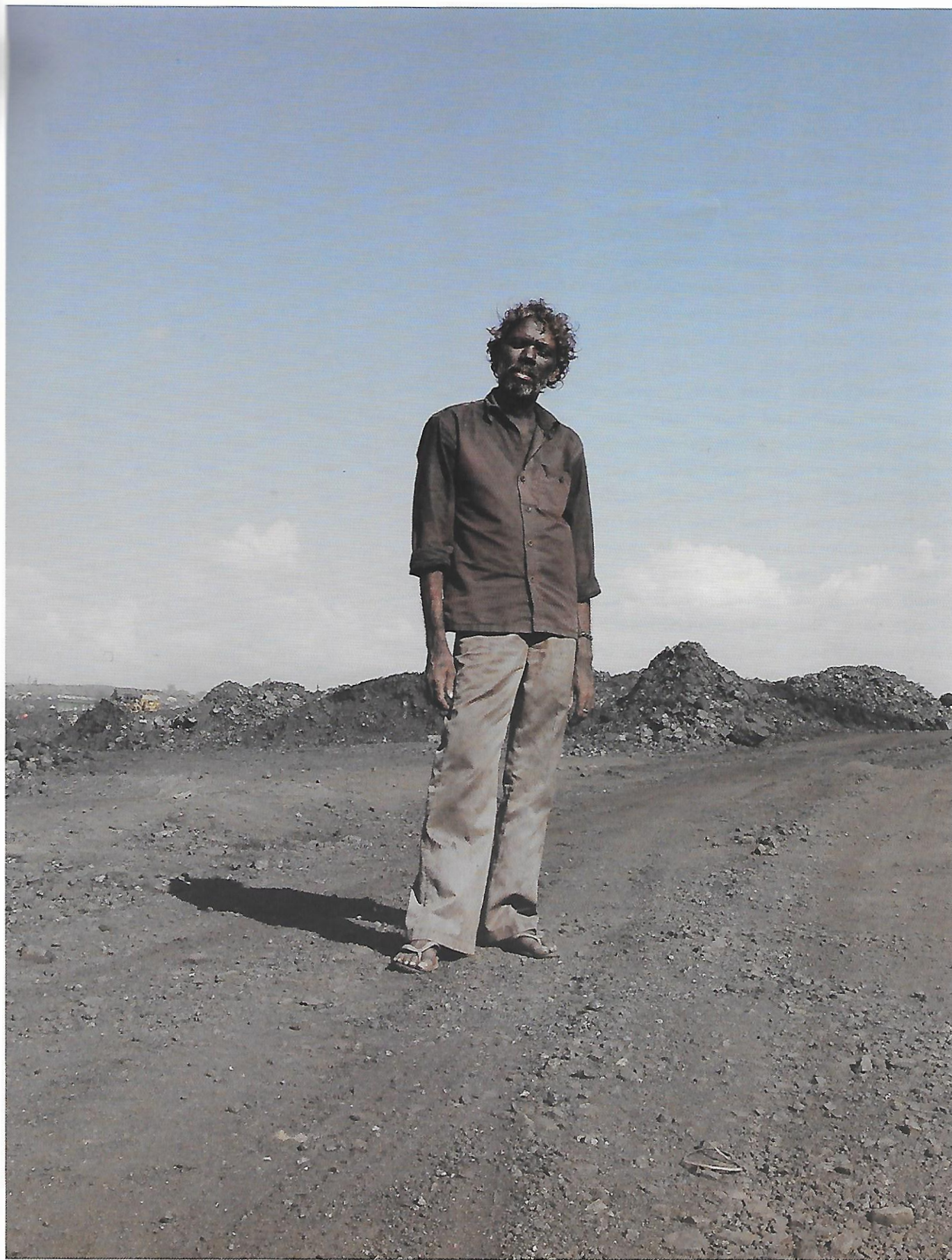
I.

In Ronny Sen's *Fire Continuum* at Tarq, Mumbai, you encounter a long shot of a man, who is ravaged and regal like a tragic hero. His clothes are dirty and worn, his face and hair are stained with coal dust and his expression is quizzical and pensive. In contrast, his posture is relaxed with his torso sagging towards one side; his hands hang loose without tension, his shirt sleeves are rolled up and one of his legs slightly bends in a comfortable attitude. All these cues suggest that he is a man of action and belongs in his environment. His misfortune is that he is a resident of a Jharia coalmine, a site of an ongoing underground fire that in recent times has consumed the landscape. The patch of land that he stands on is barren with nothing but a scattering of gravel and hillocks of debris in the background. Sen reveals these contradictions in a subtle manner by a low angle shot to suggest the importance of the subject: he stands taller than the landscape, and his head seems to touch the sky. The 'wound' of the photograph is the man's statuesque head with curly hair and his almost-contrapposto posture befitting heroes, but in this case thwarted by the scorched landscape.

Sen captures the beauty as well as the cruelty of this singed, seared place, where residents perform actions under the threat of an absent future. It's a place undergoing a protracted, slow funeral, where making new photographs would soon be impossible. The choice of the subject of the Jharia coalmine by Sen could have been a clear cut photojournalistic project, had it not been for the aesthetics of film-stills that he employs to record the place and the people.

The enormity of the fire is shown through after-effects and half-lives – through close-ups of textures and cracked surfaces of the landscape, and liminality of figures. Through a cinematic depiction deploying stunning visual technique and attention to detail; a mutually exclusive gaze on landscapes and people that gives the feeling of rupture; a serial documentation of a place to indicate its shape-shifting, disordered topography; and the disconnection between ordinary everyday events and the apocalyptic background, Sen imbues the place with an aura of the unreal. Sen refuses to abide by the conventional framing techniques used in a documentary style, with an overload of information in a single image. This could be because of the nature of the disaster. "The fires are so extensive that they re-order and re-sculpt landscapes hour-by-hour," writes Christopher Pinney in the catalogue essay. Pinney also states that these de-contextualized, dream-like figures and places are "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*." You feel that you are witnessing the aftermath of an event where the sense of time and space has collapsed.

Indian photography, for long, was embedded within 'Indian-ness', tied to its time and place, with recognisable contexts and markers of places and characters. While in western art, context was not integral as it set the paradigm of what constituted art. Western art was so overarching and universal that not only did it define what constituted 'art', but also constructed frameworks for 'Indian' or 'Asian' art. These constructs were often internalized by Indian artists in the west-to-east flow of power. In the field of photography, those moments and framing techniques were preferred that revealed some form of lack. The stress was on portraying underdevelopment and representing the social and class positions of subjects instead of their interiority or basic human



Ronny Sen. From the series *Fire Continuum*. Signed and dated verso archival pigment print. In an edition of 8 + 1. Artist's proof. 9"x6.75". 2014. © Ronny Sen.

emotions and values. People were depicted as peculiar objects – as an extension of the concept of a cabinet of curiosities. While the images by western photographs evoked surprise, desire, fear and shock, images by Indian photographers were meant to merely confirm ossified prejudices and evoke an impaired form of pity or amusement. As Aveek Sen wrote in “On Not Being a Tree – Art, Place and Tyranny of Context” in *Telegraph*, “So, an Indian photographer cannot depict loss, absence or fear, but must always represent poverty-stricken or fundamentalist Bharat, or liberalized and industrializing India.”

Sen’s *Fire Continuum* marks a shift in the way of seeing the self, its friable nature, its vulnerabilities and its resistance in the face of an inexorable situation. The relationship of tussle between man and land is the primary subject. The irreconcilable zone on the verge of collapse is filled with enchantment as well as menace – we view it as a distressed, accursed place and not an ‘Indian’ place. It could be a future address of inhabitants from any place on the brink of an apocalypse.

This shift towards self-reflection is also evident in Soham Gupta’s *Angst*. Gupta’s subjects are the nocturnal, shadowy figures of Kolkata streets, a topic that might seem like a done-to-death cliché, but is salvaged by Gupta’s execution and style. Gupta uses staged photography and biographical accounts of these people, which allow expressive agency and voice to powerless people, even though some accounts of domestic abuse, sexual harassment and madness are harrowing. In the performative portraits, the body of the subjects is the context, the field and the screen. The city recedes in the night in these close-ups; this visual device insinuates that the world is inhospitable and for these marginals, their bodies are their only home. *Angst* comprises decayed bodies, deformed bodies, pulverized bodies, disease-ridden bodies, grotesque bodies, bodies making subversive gestures and idiosyncratic moves, kissing bodies,

naked bodies, desiring bodies in a state of abandon. These unbridled bodies that are marked by eros and violence are the detritus of society, misfits beyond rehabilitation, and evoke disgust, forbidden desire, visceral shock and nightmares of self-transmogrification. “Like the hunchback in Victor Hugo’s novel, these characters are repulsive as well as humane, and are meant to evoke extreme reactions,” says Gupta.

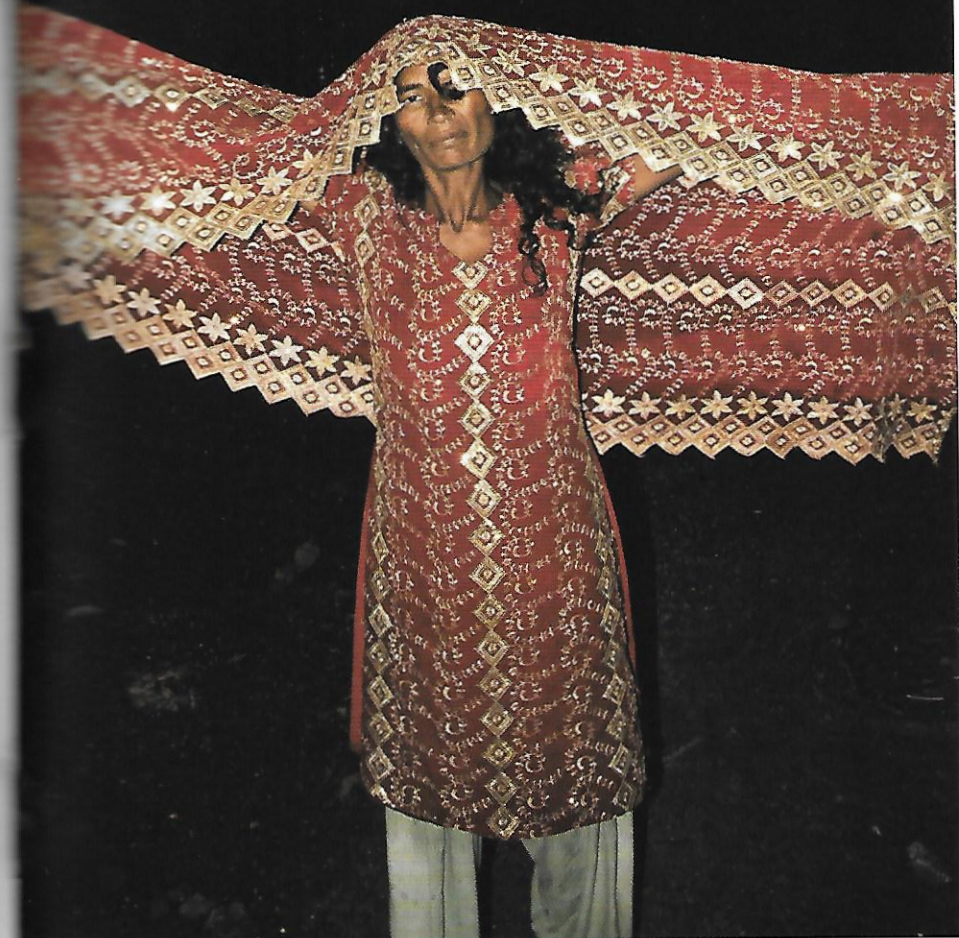
He calls these vignettes of love and squalor as self-reflective. For Gupta, the place is as much Kolkata as a fictive hellhole fermenting in the dark pit of his inner world; these figures are real as well as projections of his subconscious. While viewing these abject and obscene elements, a psychological tension is built. Since these bodies are inescapable, the viewer is forced to look *at* and *through* the various perforations of these bodies, as well as to confront the overlooked dingy corners of their own self and the world. One photograph that punctuates the series of portraits is of a huge, hoary house besieged by ivy and with a pool of collected water outside its entrance. Looking at it, you intuit that it is not a house but a person packed with covert ghosts and demons, reminiscent of a quote by writer Hilda Doolittle in *Tribute to Freud*, “We are all haunted houses.”

II.

This new way of looking and representing has dramatically changed the photography scene in India. Indian photographers are staking a claim in the international photography world on an equal footing. It is evident from the outcomes of several international competitions and awards. You will find at least one Indian photographer, if not two, shortlisted in every competition. Last year, Dayanita Singh won the Paris Photobook Award. This year, Sohrab Hura’s book *Look It’s Getting Sunny Outside!!!* was shortlisted in the Photobook of the Year category and Soham Gupta’s *Angst* was shortlisted in the First Photobook category in Paris Photobook Award. The Steidl Verlag award went to Indian photographer Tenzing Dakpa this year for his book *The Hotel*. The Invisible photography award in the Art Category also went to an Indian photographer.

The photograph is moulting skin, growing hands that borrow from other sources. Many photographers, as a creative method, are turning inwards and are striving not for the real but for something ephemeral and ungraspable that is beyond the image. The chosen subjects have shifted from the streets and the outer world to the private domain. There are several autobiographical projects exploring themes of family, illness, ancestral houses like Zishaan Akbar Latif’s *95 Mani Villa* and Adil Hasan’s *When Abba was Ill*. The single photograph has lost its proclamatory, prophetic powers and need not carry the burden, intensities and potentialities of the past, present and future occurrences. The now is not the supreme force anymore

Soham Gupta. *Untitled.* The photograph is part of a boxed set of sixty 13"x19" archival pigment prints and one standard edition of the book, *ANGST*. 2013–2017. ©Soham Gupta.



photographers have forsaken impatience and immediacy for ripened, matured conditions. The plot has spread over a suite of images that is often disseminated through form of books, book objects, films, suitcases or portable museums. More and more photographers are interspersing different media and blurring the disciplines. Their works go beyond the traditional two dimensional prints and some of them don't even use the camera! The photograph is used as a surface, a diary or alternative methods like cyanotypes and ambrotypes are used. The materiality of the photographs has become as important as the content – it's the time of assemblages, appropriations and interventions. These practitioners don't regard themselves exclusively as photographers as they also work in sculpture, video, film, installation and books. But all of them mentioned in this essay have shared a prolonged relationship with the photographic image.

A devil's advocate's view would be to see these changes as an existential crisis or a kind of sickness in the medium itself. The evolution of the medium can be perceived as a result of uncertainty due to the proliferation and the democratisation of the medium. But, to suggest that anyone wielding and using a sophisticated iPhone is a photographer is to undermine the mediations by a photographer. The subject, point of view, aesthetic effects, authorship, ethics of representation are important elements in distinguishing a photographer. Ronny Sen, by using an iPhone for his Jharia work, in a subversive gesture, has shown that the way of seeing is more important than the instrument. Besides, why should a photograph remain intact, authentic, when the world is not? Rather than a fetishistic concentration on the medium as the message, should not an art form mirror the fractured as well as accretive realities of our existence?

These hybrid practices and trends have percolated from the west that has been a crucible for experimentation since the '60s –'70s. Debates have raged about the definition, roles and forms of photography for years. In the beginning, the role of a photographer was to be a transmitter, to record and witness moments in 'the act of living'. The photograph was a visual testament to a moment, so that we remember. It had to bear the burden of memory and history on its thin skin. Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* writes, "The photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially." For him the photograph was a proof of presence and authenticity. It was "the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real, in its indefatigable expression," and "a prophecy in reverse: like Cassandra with her eyes fixed on the past." The truth claim of the photograph was used by the genre of documentary photography and photojournalism to expose a variety of upheavals, atrocities and crisis in society.

During the '60s, the field of photography was gripped by an ontological anxiety. It was noted that since photographs were mechanically produced and reproduced reality, the photograph was "as much as an object as much as, if not more than, a picture," as stated by Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iversen in the introduction to *Photography After Conceptual Art*. Hence, it fell on practitioners to prove the credentials of the photographs as pictures, and ultimately as art, rather than mere objects. This definition of the photograph as a transparent envelope enclosing reality was soon debunked as mediations by individual photographers were not taken into consideration.

Conceptual photography also developed as a reaction. Conceptual photography used staged images to represent a preconceived idea. Photographs, as a result, became unglued from the real. Performance art and other ephemeral art practices were some of its subjects. Since conceptual photography was anti-aesthetic, it often used the medium of snapshots. The digital turn and the availability of photo-editing software, further allowed the creation and construction of fictive, fabricated images with no indexical link to reality. The truth claim of the photograph was further muddled by theoretical developments of semiotics and post-structuralism. While the former revealed the 'constructedness' of all photographs and reduced their truth value to a set of decipherable codes, post-structuralism exposed the inbuilt power relationships between the photographer and his subjects. Photographs became more 'picture-like' than 'event-like'. It was no more about recovering lost realities but a signifying structure of its own accord.

Over the years the field of photography became elastic and encompassing and combined other forms and mediums like film and projection. Without dispensing the medium of the photograph, photographers unravelled, redefined and expanded the medium as suggested by George Baker's 2005 essay, *Photography's Expanded Field*. For some photographers, taking a photograph

was the starting point and not a destination in itself. This turn was said to be a post-medium or post-photography phase, defined by a fraught relationship of overlap as well as distance from the original medium. The photograph, after having undergone partial secretion and dispersal, remained the nucleus in such practices. Photography had traversed a long journey since the days it was called a Cassandra with a backwards gaze.

III.

In the Indian context, Dayanita Singh is the first Indian photographer who has actively re-framed photographs and tried various forms of dissemination. Before her, the Indian photography scene consisted of photojournalists who took street scenes and tableaux to be mirrors of social realities and national trends reflected in the copious street photographs from that time. Not a whiff of conceptualism had been caught by Indian photography. In the decade when Ed Ruscha was making his most important conceptual photobook *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, "the red meat" of his work, and translating ideas of Duchamp's readymade on the page, Raghu Rai went around India recording the social landscape of the country in carefully composed photographs crammed with details and visual patterns. He was a follower of Henri-Cartier Bresson's theory of the decisive moment formulated in the 1950s, that gave primacy to the single photograph and the possibility of recording the perfect moment in which everything falls in place symmetrically – the significant event and the organizations of forms. Cartier-Bresson nominated Rai to Magnum photo agency in 1977.

Rai was taking photographs for magazines and publications which were later collated in several coffee table books. On the other hand, Dayanita Singh realized the relevance of books for her practice pretty early. Photographs are mere raw material for which she finds the appropriate form, either in books, book objects, museums, suitcases or pothis. Her oeuvre consists of 12 books like *Privacy*, *File Room* and *House of Love*; three book objects and a collection of museums called *Museum Bhavan*. She started her career with biographical books on musician Zakir Hussain and a transgender person called Mona Ahmed, but soon moved to conceptual works, and started identifying herself as a bookmaker.

The form of the book has many allures. It is portable, can be framed into book objects and displayed in a mobile exhibition. The book is not a passive site: the book with its white spaces and sequential nature acts as the vehicle that propels the narrative, with breaks and pauses. Books, as writer Dionne Brand writes, "leave gestures in the body; a certain way of moving, of turning, a certain way of closing of the eyes, a way of leaving, hesitations." These intervals and performances change the way in which photographs in a book are experienced and felt. Moreover, the ghosts lurking in the interstices between the images become as important as the figures inside the constructed world of photographs.



Sohrab Hura. From *The Lost Head & The Bird*. 2014 – Ongoing. Photo credit Sohrab Hura. Image courtesy of Experimenter, Kolkata.

The private worlds and interiorscapes of families and houses with an eye for small details are some of her areas of interest. She also portrays objects with their affects in the tradition of still life, reflected in books like *Chairs*, *Museum of Furniture*, *Museum of Machines* and *Museum of Vitrines*. In 2017, Singh's *Museum Bhavan* won the prestigious 'The Photobook of the Year Award' at Paris Photo. It is a multivolume boxed set of nine accordion books, conceived as miniature traveling exhibitions and includes series like *Museum of Photography*, *Godrej Museum*, *Museum of Men*, and *Conversation Chambers*. Christoph Wiesner, the Artist Director of Paris Photo, compares the concept of the book box to Marcel Duchamp's *La Boîte-en-valise* (Box in a suitcase), as both share the 'aesthetics of the suitcase' whereby the artist's life work has nomadic impulses and its replicas are hoarded in a purposeful luggage as travelling objects. T.J. Demos in "Duchamp's Boîte-en-valise: Between Institutional Acculturation and Geopolitical Displacement" writes, "The paradigms of *museum* and *photography* are keys to the Boîte-en-valise structure for they open precisely onto liminality and contradictions of displacement. In them we encounter the twin engines

of *decontextualization* even while both provide the very means of *recontextualization*."

Loss and desire constitute intangible layers in Singh's practice and are reflected in her love for the archive. Her process involves walking through the labyrinth of her old photograph collections and repurposing and recontextualizing old images into new forms. This is best reflected in *Museum of Chance* that distills a lifetime of her artistic concerns and images. It mimics the impossible, shape-shifting architecture of a dream, in whose space you encounter all the influential markers, be it people, landscapes, objects, keys and talismans of your life in strange detours. It's a symphonic whole consisting of all of Singh's muses – Zakir Hussain, Mona Ahmed, buildings, furniture,

family members, friends and, of course, books.

Singh's work constantly pushes the boundaries of the form through experimentation with different ways of exhibiting and disseminating the photographic image. Apart from making books in the form of museums, she has also taken books to the museum. Singh frames books in a wooden structure and displays them in a gallery as a 'book object'. In a show at the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum in Mumbai, in 2016, she exhibited 'museums' which were also books. *Suitcase Museum* comprised two leather suitcases carrying 44 *Museum Of Chance* book objects. Books were placed in a double frame that was hung on the wall as an exhibition. Currently she is having a show of her book objects *Pothi Box* at Callicoon Fine Arts Gallery in New York. Each box has 30 image cards depicting archival documents and materials, and is installed like museum gift store items wrapped in a cloth. Since each box has 30 cards, she has installed 30 boxes with different facing images.

In 2017, MoMA acquired Singh's *Museum of Chance*. A portable wooden museum with movable structures, it's a cross between an archive cabinet and a Japanese screen, and comprises 164 images taken over 30 years. This makeshift museum can be folded and unfolded like an accordion on whim, and the peripatetic images can be transferred by the artist as well as viewers to create new spaces and connections among the images. These activities create movement and animate the viewing experience. "The books were my work and the exhibition always felt like a catalogue of my books. I was always uncomfortable with my prints on the gallery walls. It took many years for me to find the form of the mobile museums where I could get away from the wall as well continuously be rearranging my works and the architecture of their space. Unlike other art forms, the photograph did not have to be fixed, it changed depending on which photo it is next to, a photograph could expand and contract its meaning by its setting, its size, its form," says Singh.

Apart from her, photographers like Gauri Gill and Waswo X Waswo have also pushed

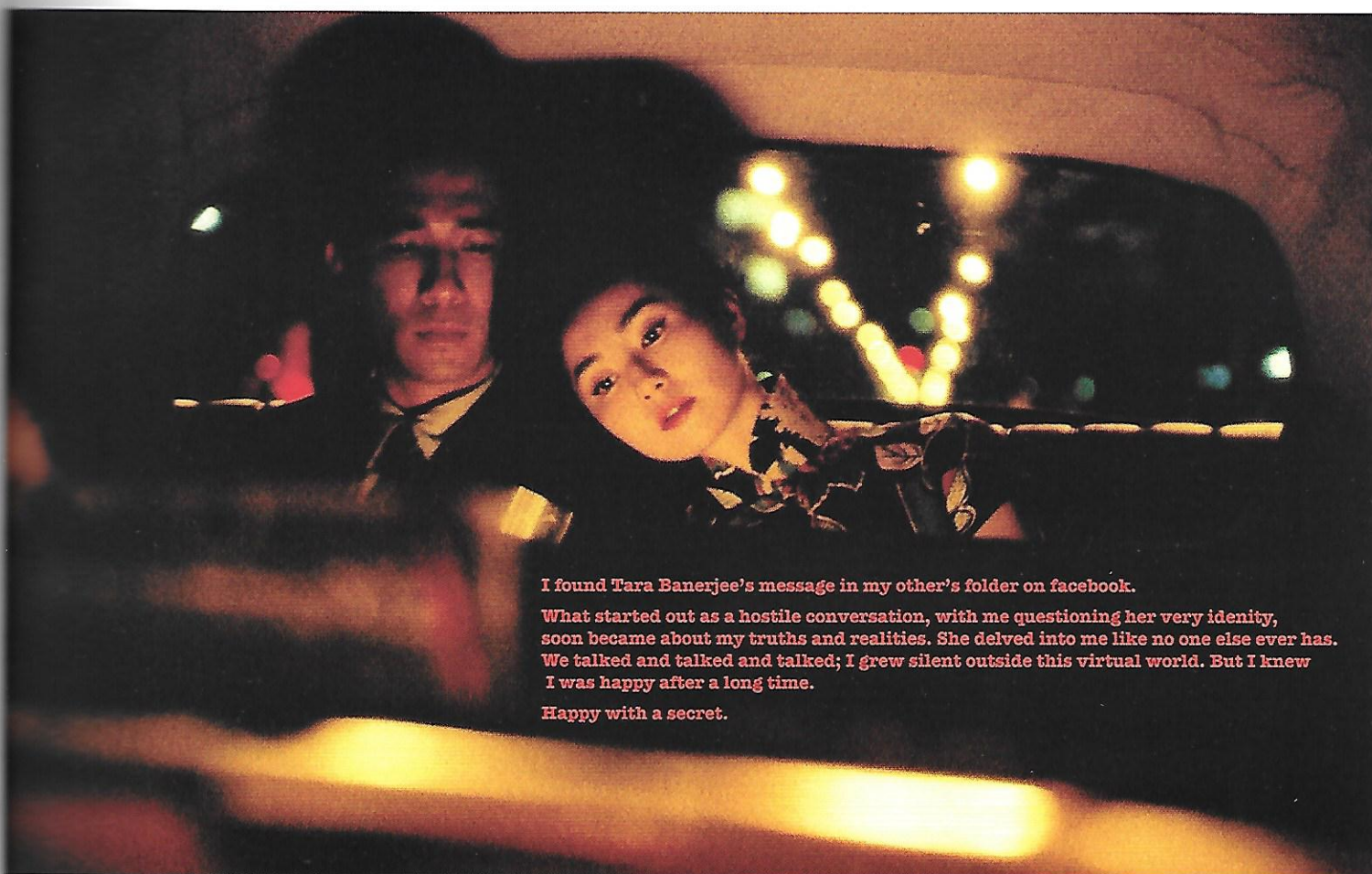
the form of photography. Both Gill and Waswo do collaborative works that fall between the fault lines of the artistic and the artisanal, and give expressive power to vernacular art forms. They both use the medium of painting and drawings in photographs to create layered works. In Gill's recent show *Acts of Appearance*, people wearing handmade masks with features of human, animal and precious objects, made by the Konkana artisans of Maharashtra, playfully subverted stereotypes and took the matter of self-representation literally in their own hands! Gill privileged the 'doing' aspects of the photograph over its aesthetic aspects and the photograph becomes an utterance rather than a document. By adding affective and performative forces, Gill stretched the domain of documentary photography.

Waswo's theatrical images involve subjects enacting scenes from Indian mythologies in his studio with painted backgrounds depicting foliage and mountains, inspired by over-the-top scenery found in erstwhile photo studios. Waswo shoots black and white digital images, which are then hand-painted by local artist and collaborator Rajesh Soni using watercolours. In a recent show at PHOTOINK, Ketaki Sheth records these archaic and atmospheric photo studios. The photographs of staged scenes emulate the gesture of shooting ephemeral acts and performances to provide evidence, practised in the heyday of conceptual art. The set can be read as an assemblage or a built environment incorporating performance, painting and installation. These photographs gain immediacy through the fading presence of the source, while they also eclipse, usurp and supercede the subject. The charm of the project lies in the slow disappearance of the original.

IV.

Indian photography has also been influenced by trends in the East. Many Indian photographers have been influenced by the hazy effects of Cambodia-based French photographer, Antoine d'Agata's photographs, and you can spot a Daido Moriyama dog in almost all the portfolios! The grainy, blurry, high contrast, black and white photographs were in vogue for a while after Indian photographers started frequenting Angkor Photo Festival in Cambodia in the early 2000s.

These influences are evident in Sohrab Hura's lacerating autobiographical photobook *Life is Elsewhere* that depicts the overwrought relationship with his mother, who suffers from paranoid schizophrenia. The book, whose title is after a Milan Kundera novel, is confessional, and acquires the form of a diary with copious handwritten texts, reflecting Hura's wounded psyche. This book shot him to fame. Hura was nominated to Magnum in 2014 and is the second Indian photographer to become part of this distinguished agency. His work has slowly become inter-disciplinary and combines photography alongside video, voice, diary extracts, fiction, music and created environments. When a photojournalism agency opens itself to multimedia practitioners, it indicates the direction in which the 'torn' photos are blowing!



I found Tara Banerjee's message in my other's folder on facebook.

What started out as a hostile conversation, with me questioning her very identity, soon became about my truths and realities. She delved into me like no one else ever has. We talked and talked and talked; I grew silent outside this virtual world. But I knew I was happy after a long time.

Happy with a secret.

Chandan Gomes. *Untitled*. From *People You May Know*. 2018. Image courtesy Chandan Gomes / PHOTOINK.

In a show titled *Sweet Life* at Experimenter, Kolkata, in 2017, he created an environment of what Aveek Sen calls “broken photography”. The sweet is mixed with the sour aspects of his life in the fractured space that hosted his threadbare domestic life marked by rips and re-stitches. The method of disruption and reduplication follow and echo these rents. The show consisted of the book *Life is Elsewhere*; a sequence of colour photographs, *Look It's Getting Sunny Outside!!!* that documented the improvement of his mother's condition after his father's re-entry into their life; a video of stills with synthesized sound and voice over, that combined images from *Life is Elsewhere* and *Look It's Getting Sunny Outside!!!*; and two works titled *A Proposition For Departure*, one as a work of sound extractions derived from certain key photographic moments, and another as a book. Texts by his mother and him were also written on the wall and some of the images had page numbers that transformed a part of the gallery into a book. The effect was that of trespassing into someone else's life split into contradictory cul-de-sacs.

Hura moves into the realm of the political with his multi-media work *The Lost Head & The Bird*. Mixing video, still images, voice, fiction, found images, music, he manufactures a menacing mashup portraying the state of the Indian nation racked by toxic nationalism. Like the book

form, the moving image renders ongoingness and clashes against the authoritative voice of Barthes for whom the pathos or melancholy of the photograph resided in the fact that it is *without future*. The video starts with a blank screen that erupts in spurts of light to reveal the outline of an image. In a voice over, Hura mobilises elements of intuitive logic, normalized magic and latent violence of the fairytale form to narrate an absurd story of a headless woman, who had been saving money to buy a new head. An obsessive lover has stolen it because he wanted a piece of her so that “I wouldn't miss you when I leave.” Soon a stream of hallucinatory and surreal photographs – replete with quasi-gothic figures with seeming necromantic power, wearing ghoulish paint-masks, enacting dismemberment with menacing gestures – flashes across the screen. A background musical score starts, gains confidence, speeds

up with urgency, contaminating the shifting images that soon catch up to its tempo. The images on the screen relocate and move from the symbolic photographs staged by Hura to found news clippings and footage from kitsch and popular media. A concatenation of bad quality ‘poor images’ ranging from clips of Bombay riots, lynchings, bomb blasts is intercut with stills from Mario video games, *Sholay* film trailer, bloodied face of Shahrukh Khan from *Darr* and Aishwarya Rai’s Miss World winning moment. Some images are steeped in absurdism and caustic humour like the footage of a person dancing in a skeleton costume or of a local reporter sitting on a flood victim’s shoulders. The music by Hanne’s d’Hoine and Sjoerd Bruil is jarring and evokes the state of emergency. The pace of the music and the flipping images cohere with each other so that you ask, has the sound broken into pieces of lurid images? Or is the cacophony released by the images? Are we listening to the sound of photographs?

The music exists as a separate entity with a visual reckoning and fate. “I have started to follow the idea of the photograph as an image, which allows me to think that an image can be anything – it can be sound, text, moving image, film still,” says Hura. “The concept of the image is inclusive of photographs and other things, which has allowed me to shift between different forms and mediums.” The photographs are still the core element of his work, as the intent of sound and text is connected to the photograph. For the three-movement composition *A Proposition for Departure*, Hura ran his photographs through an online synthesizer that scanned them for information to turn whiter points into higher frequencies of sound and darker points into lower frequencies. He also added glitches to some of the images depending on the sounds he wanted to extract. “The sounds are coming out of photographs, as the sound narrative is connected to the structure of the narrative of the photograph,” says Hura.

Chandan Gomes’s works comprising photographs, found drawings, found images and text, explore the potential of serendipity, chance encounters and the leakage of the self by faceless strangers. In his book *This World of Dew*, he played off hand-drawn sceneries by Aini Hasina Bano with photographs of real spots similar to Bano’s scrawls. He had chanced upon Bano’s notebook filled with drawings of odd angled and surreally hued mountains accidentally in a hospital in Jaipur. The project’s affective powers increase when you know that after a prolonged search Gomes finds the girl has died of an illness. Gomes’ penchant and receptivity to strangers without physical interaction is also evident in *People You May Know*. It comprises montages of found images with screenshots of Facebook and Skype conversations between Gomes and a stranger named Tara Banerjee. The relationship started on a note of suspicion in 2016 but soon turned confidential with shared secrets and furtive details. One image is a screen shot of their conversation on the laptop screen with Gomes’ partner’s photo as the wallpaper. Another is a film still from *In The Mood Of Love*, with text in which Gomes confesses that Tara had “delved into me like no one else ever has.”

The project demonstrates the haptic power of conversations and the sly, mysterious ways in which words can infiltrate your body and consciousness, shatter your old rhythms and create new habits, maps and registers. It also depicts the variety of ways in which the phantasmatic space of the internet promises a profusion of roles and reconnection in a fractured and bewildered world. The self and the other are connected like doppelgangers, abject beings that exist and yet do not. The project is also a meditation on technology as an accelerator of social loneliness, and borrows tropes from narratives of lonely guys with their simultaneous fear and enchantment of beguiling women.

This project was exhibited at the Rencontres d’Arles, the annual photography festival in southern France, this year, in which a bricolage of photographs, objects and conversations was displayed in a simulated space that replicated Gomes’ bedroom in Delhi with a chair and a desk containing Gomes’ personal belongings – his laptop, a small pocket diary, reading material, a wristwatch, earphones, coffee sachets and painkillers. The pigment prints of these photos were mounted on special aluminium dibond sheets – each fitted with a channel at the back, meant to give viewers an experience akin to that of a fluid, digital screen.

Various women photographers, especially of Indian diaspora, are reworking old family photographs to explore themes of nostalgia and displacement. Priya Kambli appropriates family photographs and re-contextualizes them. These interventions – patterns on the photographs – is a form of fenestration; obscuring the image while revealing underlying structures. She makes use of the familial qualities of materials like flour, turmeric, pigments to embellish her past and connects it to the present. These obfuscations become metaphors for the formation and erasure of identity that is inevitable to the migrant



Priya Kambli. *Studio Portrait (Aajoooba, Neela Atya, Sona, Mona and Me).*
From the series *Buttons for Eyes*. Archival Inkjet Print. 17"x 22". 2017. Image courtesy of the artist.

experience. Her fragmented psyche is reflected in the altered images. Kambli moved to the US after her parents died in an accident with all her belongings in a suitcase. Before she emigrated, she and her sister split their photographic inheritance “arbitrarily and irreparably” in half. The impulse to alter photographs came from a childhood experience, when she saw her mother piercing holes in a family photograph that completely obliterated her own face without harming the image of Kambli and her sister. “Even as a child I was aware that this act was quite significant – but what it signified was beyond my ability to decipher,” says Kambli. “As an adult, I continue to be disturbed by these artifacts, which not only encompass the photographer’s hand but also the subject’s gesture. Even though her incisions have a violent quality to them, as an image-maker I am aesthetically drawn by the physical mark, its presence and its careful placement. I am fascinated by how the presence of a mark alters and complicates the reading of an otherwise mundane family portrait.”

The indexicality of old photographs allows her to cultivate a partial relationship to her lost past. She is also attracted to the idea of portraiture as a formal documentation of identity, vanity, status and memory.

Similarly, Mohini Chandra’s *Imaginary Edens/Photos of my Father* displayed at Focus Photography Festival in Mumbai in 2013 appropriates photographs taken by her father by cutting out figures and adding glimpses of backdrops from photo studios to “create imaginary dreamscapes”. Her ancestors were taken from India to Fiji as indentured labourers under British colonial rule. Subsequent generations came to own and run photographic studios in Fiji. Arpita Shah’s *Nalini* series combines photography, installation, archival family photographs and found objects to interrogate the personal and cultural issues around migration, displacement and colonialism found within the South Asian diaspora. *Nalini* explores intimacy, distance and tensions in the relationship between Arpita, her mother and grandmother, who have grown up and lived

across various continents and cultures. Kannagi Khanna’s *Bageecha*, a series on her ancestral garden, is a mix of family archives, polaroid shots of trees and photos of leaves she and her grandfather preserved together.

The trend of appropriation of old and found photographs is also a reaction to the deluge of already existing images, and poses several questions: How do photographers create consequential and meaningful photographs in a world replete with mazes of images? Should photographers instead use the reserve of old photographers? In what ways do these visual records from the past inflect our understanding of the present?

V.

There have been various institutional initiatives for these diverse practices. In a 2016 group show titled *The Surface of Things* at Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai, photographs were augmented and supported by text, sound, movement and objects. Various photographic processes were used to arrive at the composite images and objects displayed at the show. As part of the show, Edson Dias used 19th century processes such as salt paper, albumen and Van Dyke brown to create self-portraits. He used multiple-exposures with a large format camera to create pictures of a spectral, overlapping self. He also included test prints, handwritten notes and various stages of composition as part of his work. In the same show, Sukanya Ghosh’s series *Time Travel* consisted of a combination of composite boxes, overlaying projections and backlit frames. Ghosh converted old photographs from her family album into collages that conjured up imaginary landscapes and hybrid figures. The work replicated failed attempts to reconstitute erased memory *exactly*.

In 2015, Sher-Gil Sundaram Arts Foundation pledged an annual photography grant for Rs. 5,00,000 in Umrao Singh’s name to a photographer committed to the staged or constructed image. Shan Bhattacharya was the first awardee, who has been able to make the book dummy *Portal: The Curious Account of Achintya Bose* from the grant money. It is in the form of a worn, tattered personal diary of the owner of a small photography studio in Kolkata maintained sporadically from 1994 to 1996, before his unexplained disappearance. The diary is constructed in the style of fictional ‘found archive’ that contains photographic prints, letters, torn pages from books, newspaper and magazine cuttings, declassified police records, polaroids and print advertisements obtained from different sources – which are all made by Bhattacharya. Through these documents spanning the 20th century, Bose attempts to trace photographic ‘evidence’ and information about an elusive woman who seemingly does not age. This strange, fictional tale incorporates elements from storytelling genres like that of detective thrillers and supernatural fiction. Bhattacharya wrote in his artistic proposal, “I want to present the completed project in such a way as if this is some sort of a hoax and I, the author, am only presenting someone else’s collection of photographic ‘evidence.’”



Mohini Chandra. *Visit Home* from the series *Imaginary Edens*. Photocollage. 7cms x 8 cms. 2007. Image courtesy of the artist.

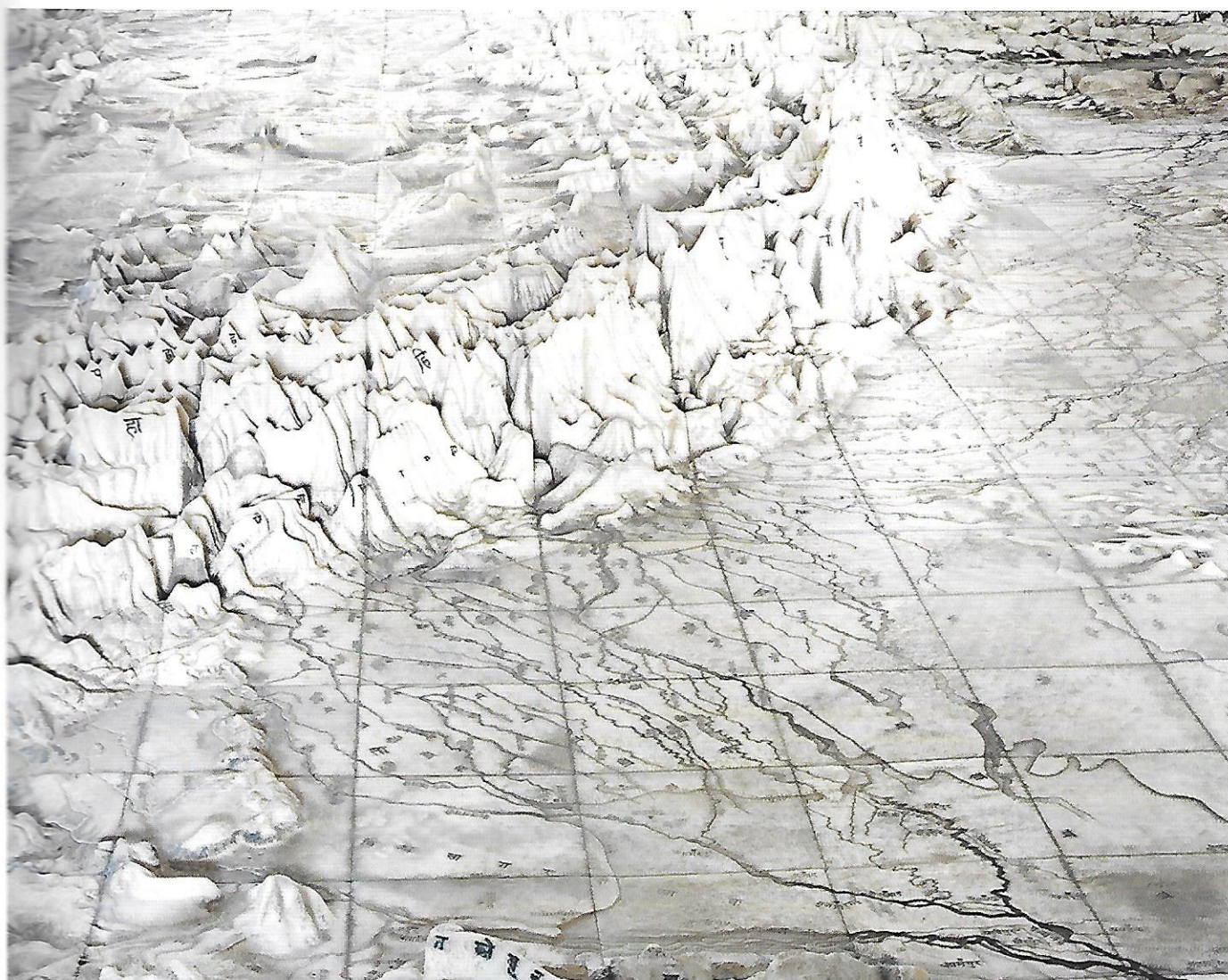
Nandita Raman's *Letters to Alice, Bill and Allen* that used photographs, videos and text, received Alkazi Foundation's Documentary Photography Award in 2016. Based on the journals of Swiss architect Alice Boner, American poet Allen Ginsberg and American photographer William Gedney, written during their stay in Varanasi, this project visually constructs fictive universes and imaginary spaces that evoke the cultural atmosphere of Varanasi in the '60s when their journals overlap. The music of Hindustani classical singer Rasoolan Bai and the films of Satyajit Ray are also used as reference material. In the February of 2018, the current iteration of *Letters to Alice, Bill and Allen* titled *Body Is A Situation* was shown at Baxter St New York, in which drawings, etchings and collages also became part of the project in addition to photographs. The city is experienced and represented through mediations by feelings, readings and the physicality of the loitering female body, reflected in drawings of the feet firmly planted on paper.

Apart from these diverse bodies of works there have been changes in the way the photographs are disseminated. In the recent GoaPhoto Festival, vintage Goan houses were turned into museums or galleries. The displayed works were inextricably linked to the surrounding architecture. Lola Mac Dougall, a founder of GoaPhoto and artistic director of Jaipur Photo festival refrains from calling them 'home-galleries'. "In contrast with the aseptic white cube gallery space, our homes-venues retained their in situ furniture," says Mac Dougall. "This encouraged site-specificity while testing our ability as curators and exhibition designers to work around them: not one nail was hammered on account of the festival, as we wanted to minimize our intrusion while investigating how the two aesthetics – the photographic and the domestic – engaged with each other." The whole process culminated in a recently published photobook that uses as its raw material the exhibition shots that were taken by Fabien Charuau.

VI.

The polymorphous nature of photography reflects a host of lived and felt experiences, rather than an affectation or an effect. Rather than seeing it as a moment of crisis, these changes should be seen as an expansion of the field. Almost all the practitioners agree. Dayanita Singh, for whom bringing a conceptual thought to photography is of paramount importance, says, "I say photography starts *now!*" For Sohrab Hura, photography has many lives. "When I went distant from the medium and stepped back, I was able to look at the *wholeness* of photography," says Hura. "I think photography is nothing but a language with many vocabularies. How you use the vocabulary and what you write are important and not one vocabulary over the other." Lola Mac Dougall also does not perceive it as a crisis but just as a transformation in the way photography is created and presented. She enjoys the emergence of the photobook as an art form. "Books have the charm of their materiality, their promise to stay around, at least for a while," says Mac Dougall. In the age of the internet, books also allow photographers to claim authorship of their work with a preconceived idea and the intention that they set out to present. "The internet offers great opportunities to photographers to disseminate their works, but has, at the same time, dispossessed them of the control of their images: once they are out there, they can end in the weirdest of places, in a new context perhaps contrary to the photographer's intentions. Photographers are therefore losing a once held monopoly over their images and the book form offers then more control on its context and therefore on its meaning. They can even have more of a say in terms of their dissemination," says Mac Dougall. Rahaab Allana, Curator/Publisher of the Alkazi Foundation for the Arts, feels that if this moment has to be viewed as a crisis, then it's a "crisis of more, and not less." Photography started as visual anthropology but now other art practices have to be brought within its ambit as the world has become more complex. "The definition of documentary has changed from a record of a moment or event to a means to describe a condition," says Allana. "A condition is a collection of moments, and all these moments and occurrences are not just limited to one period of time but its past and its future, so there is the shift towards the moving image. The new photography has to filter a plethora of information – online viewership, authorship, voice, authenticity – it is not a monolithic practice."

These arguments suggest that photography is not one medium but many. Even in the past, it meant different things to different practitioners – for Marcel Duchamp it was about the photograph's automaticity and its capacity to be mindlessly mechanical, for Sol Le Witt it was about seriality, and for Henri Cartier-Bresson it was about the decisive moment. The range of practices that has mushroomed need not be seen as some kind of absence or dearth in the medium but an exploration of various possibilities.



Nandita Raman. *Benaras Ghat Model.* Bharat Mata Mandir. Archival print. 20"x24". 2014. ©Nandita Raman.

VII.

Lucy Soutter in *Why Art Photography?* writes that it's time to move away from the theory of art as representation and instead focus on art's affect and the way it resonates and vibrates our bodies in response. What is the future of photography? Here are two extreme instances reflecting the ductility of photographs: French writer and photographer Herve Guibert in *Ghost Image* recounts a botched attempt to shoot a photograph of his mother. It was to be a forbidden image without any trace or resemblance to his father's past images depicting her put-on, 'outside' face. The first thing that he did "was to remove my father from the room where the picture was to be taken, to chase him away so that her image would no longer pass through the one he had created of her ... so that there was nothing left but our own complicity." He removed his mother's make-up, washed off her ornate hairstyle, and then took her picture. But once the photo was developed he realized that he had failed to attach the film to the camera and had photographed nothing. The written account is the "despair of image" or a "ghost image".

Similarly, in Mira Nair's *Namesake*, Gogol reminisces a childhood trip to a jetty with his father, Ashok Ganguly, after he passes away. Ashok had wanted to record the moment, but on discovering that he had forgotten his camera, he asked Gogol to shut his eyes and said, "Now, you will have to remember this... Remember that we made this journey to a place beyond which there was no place to go." Years later, Gogol recalls this moment like a picture, after his father has gone beyond that last precipice, beyond the "place beyond which there was no place to go".

In both these instances, the ghost photographs are free. Unencumbered by the trappings of the medium, they are outlines, figments of missed encounters that launch desire beyond the invisible frame, and exist as affect and translations into text and recollection.