INDIA
PUBLIC PLACES PRIVATE SPACES
Contemporary Photography and Video Art
Gayatri Sinha  Paul Sternberger
For the past twenty-five years, a swirling mix of voices from India's past and present has shaped Indian photography and video art. The artists' gaze has been fixed on India's lives, revealing, interpreting and influencing the staid, chaotic, monochrome and colorful dimensions of a country of over one billion people. Some artists have bent the strong tradition of photojournalism to explore more subjective modes of photography that still include socially and politically engaged street photography. Some artists treat photography and video as overtly interpretive media that extend into social analysis, while others construct elaborate fictions with self-portraiture and performance to create deeply personal, often enigmatic narrative histories. All the artists represented in INDIA: Public Places, Private Spaces provide rich insight into the dynamics shaping the contemporary Indian psyche and landscape, including deeply rooted cultural practices, violent economic and political shifts, the pervasive influence of the media and the indomitable forces of class and caste. In the process, they also investigate identity as a social construct, engage with issues of gender and sexuality and explore the effects of population migrations.

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New Forms
BARBARA LONDON

The political and cultural upheavals of the 1960s saw the emergence of new artistic forms, made with new creative tools. Most notably, reasonably priced, consumer-grade video cameras and editing systems, crude by today's standards, permitted innovative "alternative" practices. Very much in tune with the rebellious and revolutionary spirit of the times, the art created with these new tools was difficult to collect or exhibit in traditional spaces. It was more suited to seat-of-the-pants, artist-run, rough-and-ready venues that were sprouting up in urban centers. Some artists produced linear video that paralleled independent filmmaking. Others developed room-scale installations, often with a live video camera designed specifically for the particular exhibition space (preferably not a white cube of a room). At the time "performance art" was not yet a term. In New York, Joan Jonas called her work "pieces" or "concerts," in which she performed with a video camera and a real time image of herself on a monitor. Critics called Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci "body artists." Yvonne Rainer created dance as the most minimal of actions before she turned to film. In theater, Richard Foreman worked with the spareness of Samuel Beckett and extended and contracted time in the theatrical moment.

Coming on the heels of the 1968 student unrest and the rise of the women's movement, installation started out with an experimental edge. Artists intentionally provoked and challenged the status quo with the new video forms. Many intentionally turned their backs on television and considered broadcast networks the enemy. The notions of selling or collectability were of little concern to most. These artists lived from moment to moment with their projects, which were made for "now." If they presented an installation a second time, they drastically modified it for a new situation. Artists often gained access to equipment by going on the road to produce and install new pieces at international festivals or by doing residencies at art schools. Meanwhile, museums wrestled with how to adapt the ever-evolving, mutable installation form to their galleries.

In this new art form, starting with a clean slate, female and male artists were on equal footing. They approached installation from a wide range of disciplines – painting and sculpture in particular. Many turned to a variety of media to illuminate and activate a space: small-format video and sound, Super-8 film, slides, even the camera obscura.

Over the years technology has advanced considerably. Equipment has become less expensive, more versatile and ubiquitous. Projectors are now a common display format, with brighter, larger and sharper images. High-resolution digital flat screens are replacing boxy analog monitors. Sound as an essential component is more malleable and spatial, and interactivity is an option. Institutions and collectors are more comfortable and better equipped to handle a work's technical aspects and preservation requisites. Museums integrate video work into their contemporary galleries and construct dedicated spaces, as required by specific projects. Biennials, as a matter of course, devote a large portion of their exhibition spaces to installation.

In India, independent media activity began with the satellite and cable television revolution in the 1980s. With a sense of political urgency amid their country's complex and turbulent backdrop, the earliest practitioners had a connection to local documentary photography and film traditions. As India's economy developed in the 1990s, a cultural shift ensued. Nalini Malani (b. 1947) and Vivan Sundaram (b. 1947) – artists who already had established reputations in the visual arts – started to use video, adding time as
another dimension to their new installation work. They also faced the same problem confronted by early media artists in the West: their access to gallery spaces and exhibition equipment was limited.

Today the situation has vastly improved, with the burgeoning contemporary art market in New Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore, and the rise of commercial galleries and alternative exhibition venues. The younger generation readily works with video and media technologies, having grown up with greater access to consumer tools that are more widely available. They attend art schools both at home and abroad, and often draw upon local subject matter, as Sonia Khurana (b. 1968) effectively did in articulating an authentic voice with her video Mona’s Song (2004).

India has become a center of the information technology industry. The Internet plays a vital role, facilitating an array of booming cultures driven by different imperatives. The film and music industries are experimenting with new formats and content, call centers and other new service industries are thriving, and the community of software developers is nimbly moving ahead. Each of these sectors, which employs “creatives,” is closely tied to a vast global network. Some artists in India pursue commercial information technology careers before turning full-time to their art. Shilpa Gupta (b. 1976) is a versatile programmer who creates interactive installations that engage viewers with notions of role-playing and spectatorship, often with life-size projections of herself.

Artists such as Ranbir Kaleka, Vivan Sundaram, Sonia Khurana, Shilpa Gupta and Nalini Malani, among many others, pursue media to create distinctive projects rich in metaphor. They are what Malani describes as being “part of a committed cross-national artists’ community, dissidents in the structures of established power relations with social / environmental protest being a major concern” in many of their works.

For these artists, video is a viable, encompassing and flexible form. Coming from a culture with a multiplicity of traditions, their combinations of old and new content and materials result in inventive amalgamations. New media solutions from the Indian subcontinent will certainly continue to invigorate contemporary art practice in other parts of the world for a long time to come.
Sunil Gupta, Love & Light #1, 2004, 59 x 25½ inches, courtesy of the artist


6 Excerpt from Ravi Agarwal, unpublished Artist's Notes.

7 Excerpt from Ravi Agarwal, unpublished Artist's Notes.


12 Excerpt from Rajesh Vora, unpublished Artist's Statement.


15 Excerpt from Jitish Kallat, unpublished Artist's Statement.

16 Excerpt from Shantanu Lodh, unpublished Artist's Statement.


22 Subodh Gupta in *Video Art in India* (Calcutta: Apeejay Press, 2003), p. 76.

23 Excerpt from Surekha, unpublished Artist's Statement.

24 Excerpt from Sonia Khurana, unpublished Artist's Statement.


26 Excerpt from Atul Bhatta, unpublished Artist's Note.


29 Excerpt from Gauri Gill, unpublished Artist's Note.


Checklist of Works

RAVI AGARWAL
Boat from the series Alien Waters, 2004–6, 11 x 16 inches, courtesy of the artist
Interior from the series Alien Waters, 2004–6, 11 x 16 inches, courtesy of the artist
Refuse from the series Alien Waters, 2004–6, 11 x 16 inches, courtesy of the artist
Kite String Making, Surat, Gujarat, 1998, from the series Down and Out: Migrant Labor in Gujarat, 11 x 16 inches, courtesy of the artist
Printing of Cloth, Surat, Gujarat, 1998, from the series Down and Out: Migrant Labor in Gujarat, 11 x 16 inches, courtesy of the artist
Roadside Cobbler, Surat, Gujarat, 1998, from the series Down and Out: Migrant Labor in Gujarat, 11 x 16 inches, courtesy of the artist
Emigrés, 11 x 14 inches, courtesy of the artist
Dr. Kumar Patel at Bell Labs in New Jersey, Fresno, 1987, from the series Emigrés, 11 x 14 inches, courtesy of the artist
Last Viewing of a Punjabi Woman in a Funeral Parlor, El Centro, USA, 1987, from the series Emigrés, 11 x 14 inches, courtesy of the artist
Nand Kaur, with her Son, an ex-World War II Pilot, Yuba City, 1987, from the series Emigrés, 11 x 14 inches, courtesy of the artist
One of the Many Patel Motels, Fresno, 1987, from the series Emigrés, 11 x 14 inches, courtesy of the artist
Steve Banerji, Owner of Chippendales at his LA Operation, 1987, from the series Emigrés, 11 x 14 inches, courtesy of the artist
Layered Arch, 2003, 30 x 22 inches, copyright Shahid Datawala, courtesy Tasveer / Foss-Gandi
Purdah Ladies, 2003, 30 x 22 inches, copyright Shahid Datawala, courtesy Tasveer / Foss-Gandi
Regal Man, 2003, 30 x 22 inches, copyright Shahid Datawala, courtesy Tasveer / Foss-Gandi
See pages 78–81

ANITA DUBE
Kissa-e-Noor Mohammed (Garam Hawa), 2004, single-channel video, 15:00, courtesy of the artist
Via Negativa, 2000, 3 gelatin silver prints, 30 x 44 inches each, photographs by C.K. Rajan, courtesy of the artist
See pages 96–7, 122–3

NAVIJOT ALTAF
Lacuna in Testimony, 2003, three-channel video installation with 72 mirrors, time variable, courtesy of the artist
See pages 72–5

PABLO BARTHOLOMEW
A Motel Owner and his Wife, Fresno, 1987, from the series
See pages 124–7

ATUL BHALLA
I Was Not Waving But Drowning II, 2005, series of 14 photographs, 18 x 12 inches each, courtesy of the artist
See pages 124–7

SHAHID DATAWALA
Ladies Toilet, 2003, 30 x 22 inches, copyright Shahid Datawala, courtesy Tasveer / Foss-Gandi
Motel Owner Dhansukh Dan Patel’s Parents, in his New Home, Nashville, Tennessee,
2004, from the series The Americans, 12 x 36 inches, courtesy of the artist

Party for Indian Entrepreneurs, Washington DC, 2002, from the series The Americans, 16 x 24 inches, courtesy of the artist

Preparing for the Rath Yatra, Ganesha Temple, Nashville, Tennessee, 2004, from the series The Americans, 16 x 24 inches, courtesy of the artist

Wedding of Dr. Suresh Gupta's Son, Virginia, 2002, from the series The Americans, 12 x 36 inches, courtesy of the artist

See pages 138–41

SHILPA GUPTA

Untitled, 2004, interactive video projection with sound, courtesy of the artist

See pages 108–9

SUBODH GUPTA

Pure, 2000, single-channel video, 8:00, courtesy of the artist

See pages 116–7

SUNIL GUPTA

Foundation / Sunil, 2006, from the series Country – Portrait of an Indian Family, 59 x 25 ½ inches, courtesy of the artist

Gun / Wheat, 2006, from the series Country – Portrait of an Indian Family, 59 x 25 ½ inches, courtesy of the artist

Havan / House, 2006, from the series Country – Portrait of an Indian Family, 59 x 25 ½ inches, courtesy of the artist

See pages 84–5

SAMAR AND VIJAY JODHA

Through the Looking Glass: Television & Popular Culture in South Asia, 2003, 20 digitally projected photographs, photography: Samar S. Jodha; research and editing: Vijay S. Jodha, courtesy of the artists

See pages 144–7

RANBIR KALEKA

Cockerel-2, 2004, single-channel video installation, 6:00, actor: Ram Gopal Bajaj; cockerel:

Mustapha; digital compositing and video stils: Riverbank Studios, New Delhi, courtesy of the artist

See pages 128–31

JITISH KALLAT

Artist Making Local Call, 2005, digital print on vinyl mesh, 95 x 411 inches, courtesy of the artist

See pages 92–3

SONIA KHURANA

Head-Hand, 2004, single-channel video, 7:30, courtesy of the artist

Tantra, 2004, single-channel video installation, 0:44, courtesy of the artist

See pages 119–21

SHANTANU LODH

I Slapped My (Semi-Feudal, Semi-Colonial) Father, 2001, series of 11 photographs, 20 x 14 inches each, courtesy of the artist

See pages 94–5

ANNU PALAKUNNATHU MATTHEW

Noble Savage / Savage Noble, 2001, from An Indian from India, archival digital print, 12 x 16 inches, courtesy of Sepia International

Quanah Parker, Washington, DC / Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, Providence, RI [Before], 2000,
RAM RAHMEN
Capital Studios, Delhi, 1986, 16 x 20 inches, courtesy of the artist
Gents Urinal, Old Delhi, 1991, 20 x 16 inches, courtesy of the artist
Hyderabad, 1982-3, 16 x 20 inches, courtesy of the artist
Indira Gandhi, Delhi, 1989, 20 x 16 inches, courtesy of the artist
Siya, London, 1991, 76 x 76 cm, courtesy of the artist
Picture No. 3, 1995, 16 x 20 inches, courtesy of the artist
See pages 142-3

RAGHU RAI
Army Generals Preparing for Indira Gandhi's Funeral, Delhi, 1984, 20 x 24 inches, courtesy of the artist
Crowds Crashing into Teen Murti House to Take a Last Look at Indira Gandhi, 1984, 20 x 24 inches, courtesy of the artist
Indira Gandhi at her Residence, 1984, 20 x 24 inches, courtesy of the artist
Indira Gandhi in Congress Meeting, Delhi, 1966, 20 x 24 inches, courtesy of the artist
Indira Gandhi, 1968, 20 x 24 inches, courtesy of the artist
Mrs. Gandhi with the then President Mr. V.V. Giri, 1974, 20 x 24 inches, courtesy of the artist
Rajiv Gandhi at the Funeral Pyre of his Mother, Indira Gandhi, 1984, 20 x 24 inches, courtesy of the artist
Widows of Sikh Riots Following the Death of Indira Gandhi, 1984, 20 x 24 inches, courtesy of the artist
See pages 52-4

GIAM SCARPA
A Day with Schail and Mariyan, 2004, single-channel video, 17:00, actors: Schail Ali and Mariyan Husain, courtesy of the artist
The Lost City, 2005, single-channel video, 14:00, actors: Praveen Thambi and Ashwani Kumar Ashu; voice: Shail Hashmi, courtesy of the artist
See pages 62-3

RAHUL SINGH
Kemp's Corner from a Leather Goods Shop, Mumbai, Maharashtra, 1989, 36 x 60 inches, © Succession Rahul Singh
Pavement Mirror Shop, Howrah, West Bengal, 1991, 36 x 60 inches, © Succession Rahul Singh
Pedestrians, Firozabad, Uttar Pradesh, 1992, 36 x 60 inches, © Succession Rahul Singh
Zaveri Bazaar and Jeweler's Showroom, 1991, 36 x 60 inches, © Succession Rahul Singh
See pages 69, 110-1

TEJAL SHAH
Southern Siren – Maheshwari, 2006, digital photograph on archival alfa cellulose paper, 57 ¾ x 38 inches, courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery, New York & Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai, collection of the artist
The Barge She Sat in, Like a Burnished Throne / Burned on the Water, 2006, digital photograph on archival photo paper, 38 x 57 inches, courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery, New York & Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai, collection of the artist
Trans-, 2004-5, two-channel video, 12:00, courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery, New York & Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai, collection of the artist
You Too Can Touch The Moon – Yashoda with Krishna, 2006, digital photograph on archival photo paper, 57 x 38 inches, courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery, New York & Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai, collection of the artist
See pages 98-101

SUREKHA
The Other-Self, 2005, series of 6 digital photographs, 24 x 20 inches, courtesy of the artist
Hair Dresser of the Year Awards, Mumbai, 1998, 11 x 14 inches, courtesy of the artist
See pages 70-1, 118

VIVIAN SUKRAM
Re-take of Amrita – Amrita and Cousin Viola, 2001, 19 x 12 inches, courtesy of Sepia International
Re-take of Amrita – Amrita
Dreaming, 2002, 21 x 19 inches, courtesy of Sepia International
Re-take of Amrita – Bourgeois Family – Mirror Frieze, 2001, 15 x 26 inches, courtesy of Sepia International
Re-take of Amrita – Lovers, 2001, 15 x 21 inches, courtesy of Sepia International
Re-take of Amrita – Preening, 2001, 15 x 21 inches, courtesy of Sepia International
Re-take of Amrita – Remembering the Past, Looking to the Future, 2001, 15 x 21 inches, courtesy of Sepia International
Re-take of Amrita – Sisters with “Two Girls”, 2001, 15 x 12.2 inches, courtesy of Sepia International
See pages 112-5

RAJESH VORA
Aspiring Model, Mumbai, 1998, 11 x 14 inches, courtesy of the artist
Beauty Pageant, Mumbai, 1997, 11 x 14 inches, courtesy of the artist
Hair Dresser of the Year Awards, Mumbai, 1998, 11 x 14 inches, courtesy of the artist
Look of the Year Contest, Mumbai, 1998, 11 x 14 inches, courtesy of the artist
See pages 82-3

MAHENDRA SHARMA
Boys in Shadow, Gujarat, 2002, 16 x 20 inches, courtesy of the artist
Cows in Burnt-out Shop, Gujarat, 2002, 20 x 16 inches, courtesy of the artist
Family through Barred Door, Gujarat, 2002, 20 x 16 inches, courtesy of the artist
See pages 55-7
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BARBARA LONDON, Associate Curator, Department of Media, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, founded MOMA’s ongoing Video Exhibition Program in 1974. She has built an essential context for the visionary statements being made internationally in video and media art by multicultural voices, emerging talents and more established artists such as Laurie Anderson, Gary Hill, Mako Idemitsu, Joan Jonas, Shigeko Kubota, Nam June Paik and Bill Viola. Her objective has been to link the electronic arts with the more traditional art media. To document, preserve and support this vital art field, she helped establish the Video Study Center and assembled its unique collection of more than 1,000 independently produced videotapes and related historical and theoretical publications.

SUKEETU MEHTA is a fiction writer and journalist based in New York. His first book, Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found, won the Kiriyama Prize, and was a finalist for the 2005 Pulitzer Prize. He has won the Whiting Writers’ Award, the O. Henry Prize and a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship for his fiction. Mehta’s work has been published in the New York Times Magazine, National Geographic, Granta, Harper’s Magazine, Time, Condé Nast Traveler and The Village Voice, and has been featured on National Public Radio’s All Things Considered. Mehta was born in Calcutta and raised in Bombay and New York. He is a graduate of New York University and the Iowa Writers’ Workshop.


PAUL STERNBERGER is Associate Professor of Art History, Rutgers University, Newark, and co-curator of INDIA: Public Places, Private Spaces – Contemporary Photography and Video Art. He received his Ph.D. from Columbia University and joined the faculty of Rutgers in 1997. His publications include By Its Cover: Modern American Book Cover Design (Princeton Architectural Press, 2005) and Between Amateur and Aesthete: The Legitimization of Photography in America, 1880–1900 (The University of New Mexico Press, 2001). His articles and reviews have appeared in journals such as History of Photography, American Art and Journal of the History of Collections. His curatorial projects include By Its Cover: Modern American Book Cover Design (Paul Robeson Gallery, Rutgers University, 2005) and Victorian Pleasures: Nineteenth-Century American Board and Table Games from the Liman Collection (New York Historical Society 1992–3; Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University 1990–1).