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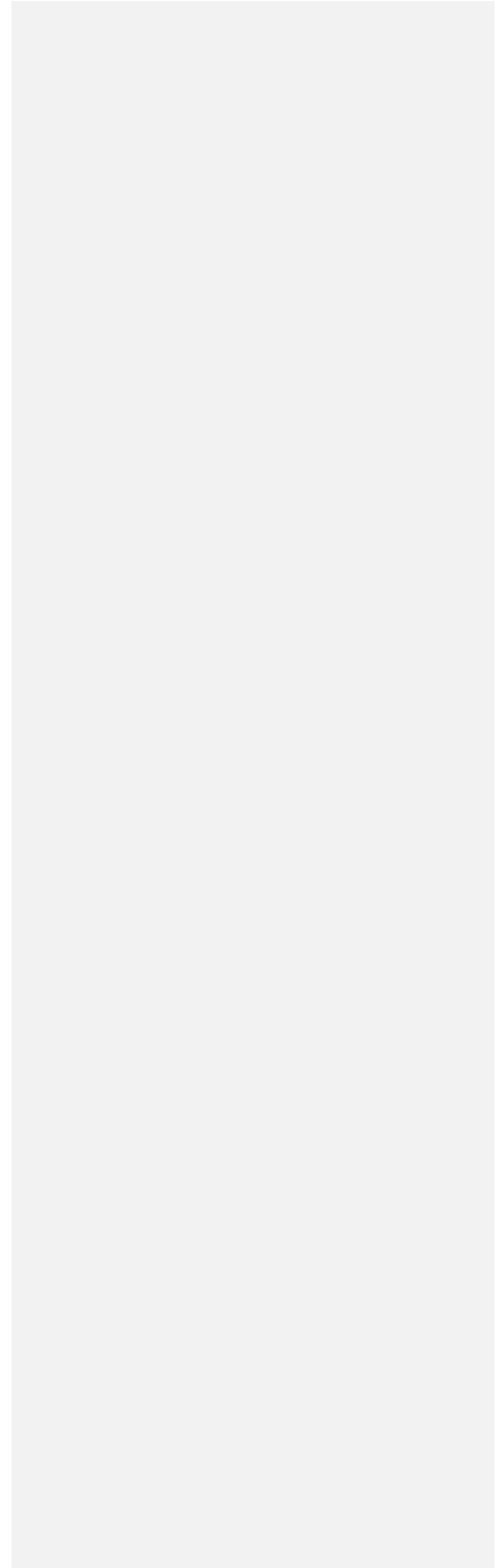
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# Queer Migrations

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements of the University of Westminster  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract:

This commentary brings my personal migration story to bear on our shifting understanding of both queers and migrants into the realm of contemporary art practice. It focuses on four major projects that I had exhibited over a ten-year period starting in 2004 and attempts to devise a theoretical link between these works. It is my intention through the commentary to create a coherent rationale about my practice and how it followed my movements. My aim in making the artworks was to give visibility to an otherwise invisible history and one that has remained so within art history. The writing is also breaking through the silence around this subjectivity and to engage in a way that would be meaningful to artists and scholars in the future. It was my intention to create original works of art that were presented nationally and internationally. I intended for them to address the questions that I had about being a queer male of Indian origin living in the West, and then returning to live in India. In this commentary I draw out the knowledge built from each project as they were made often in response to pressing political or social need in a local context such as Section 28 (1988) in the UK or Section 377 in India (1861). These shifting migrations have constructed a thread through the projects, which highlight the significantly different approaches that informed my practice whilst the overall questions remain constant.

## Introduction.

My first migration (to Canada) was an almost accidental one or, so it seemed to me. I never did discover if there was more than curiosity to see the world that drove my parents' emigration from India to Canada in the late 1960s. They did not have the means just to travel for its own sake. My first year was traumatic as a senior high school student in an inner city ethnically divided school where there were no other Indians. In fact, India was not a place that anyone had ever heard of, it seemed. I struggled to collapse fifteen years of growing up into one. I was alienated without even a peer group and this did not change till I got to college and discovered my best kept secret sex life had a name, and a community attached to it.

The two things happened simultaneously, learning about activism and learning how to make a photograph when I got involved with student activism and gay liberation as an undergraduate in Montréal, Canada in the early 1970s. There were a lot of words but no pictures. I had grown up in India with a camera in the family and this tradition of the family album continued when I arrived in Canada in 1969. However, here in the West I was able to afford a basic 35 mm camera and lens and my photography suddenly took on a more serious note. I began to document different aspects of burgeoning gay life, including protests on the streets, various community interest groups, pubs and bars where people gathered socially, and of course all of my friends and lovers. I taught myself how to make better photographs from the books that I looked at. I bought a basic enlarger and was able to make my own prints in my bathroom.

All this time I had almost no other contact with the public culture around photography and art as I was in business school. (Concordia University) My other main activity was to go to the cinema, this is something that I had been doing since my childhood in India, and television – a new medium for me. I was introduced by my university’s film society to the idea of independent filmmakers and I had an informal education simply by viewing European and World Cinema. I was more interested in narrative film makers; Kurosawa, Ozu, Truffaut than in their experimental counterparts like Resnais and Godard. But then the Germans caught my attention especially Fassbinder and Von Pauheim who meshed gay sexual politics into plausible narratives and melodrama whose codes were familiar to me from Hindi cinema.

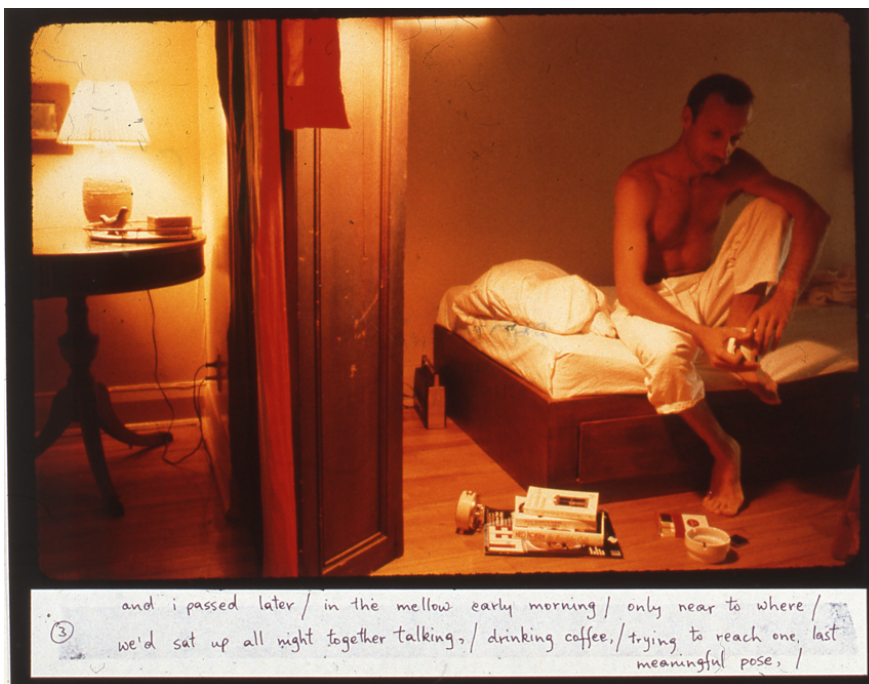


Figure 1. "24 November 1977", from the series, "Untitled", Montréal 1977

In this obsession with visual narratives a close friend and I developed a whole series of fictional characters based upon the people around us, people that we saw regularly every night in the gay bars. The characters were given names and fictional backgrounds – poetry was also written. One day we decided to put my photography and his poems together, using our characters as subjects to make a series of works that were addressing our lives as young gay men that were out and about in the city. The form of this work (Figure 1), a 10 x 8 photograph with handwriting in two lines underneath, was derived from the work (Figure 2) of Duane Michaels. (Benedict-Jones, 2014).<sup>1</sup> Whilst I was teaching myself how to make



Figure 2. Michals, Duane, "The pleasures of the glove" 1974, 14 Silver gelatine prints, Art Gallery of New South Wales

technically good photographic prints, I was also teaching myself some rudimentary history of 20<sup>th</sup> century photography made popular by a Time-Life series of books. (Various, 1970) Of course, there was no gay or queer section back then so one had to try and read between

<sup>1</sup> Benedict-Jones, L. (2014). *Storyteller: The Photographs of Duane Michals* (1st ed.). Pittsburgh: Prestel.



the lines or see between the pictures to find any relevant images.

The broader gay cultural context was better served by written art forms such as novels and poetry. We formed a gay reading group that met weekly to discuss a single work, either a novel, play or poem starting with *A Passage to India* (Forster, 2005). Then an underground cinema came into focus and we began to make connections in cinema between film-makers Jean Cocteau, Fassbinder, Rosa von Prauhheim<sup>2</sup>, and more mainstream films like *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (John Schlesinger 1971) and *The Killing of Sister George* (Robert Aldrich 1968). In the realm of photography, we had to make do with the remnants of 1950s *Physique* magazine culture and more hard-core gay pornography that was becoming available via our first gay bookshop in Montréal called *L'Androgyne/Androgyny* (1972—2002). Gay politics became a battle around censorship. A very important struggle that polarised women and gay men ensued to legally make and distribute images that depicted our sexuality. (McCaskell, 2016) All of this happened before I went to art school.

My turning point towards photography came when I went to New York in 1976 to embark on an MBA. It was here in New York that I encountered the two things that I was most interested in; photography and gay culture. I gave up business studies, I enrolled at the New School to study photography with Lisette Model<sup>3</sup>, Philippe Halsman<sup>4</sup> and George Tice<sup>5</sup> and began to spend a lot of my days either photographing public gay life in the West Village (Figure 2) or visiting the more than fifty photography galleries that had sprung up in Manhattan. Very quickly I found interesting gay photographers who made ‘gay photographs’

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<sup>2</sup> *It Is Not the Homosexual Who Is Perverse, But the Society in Which He Lives* (1971)  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0066136/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/constituents/lisette-model?all/all/all/0>

<sup>4</sup> <http://philippehalsman.com>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/artists/3733/george-a-tice-american-born-1938/>

that appealed to me, such as; Robert Mapplethorpe, Duane Michaels, Arthur Tress and Peter Hujar.



*Figure 3. From the series, "Christopher Street", New York 1976 (Gupta, Sunil, "Christopher Street," Stanley Barker 2018)*

The following year I came to London and after some desultory attempts at finding an accounting job I enrolled in a full-time photography course at the West Surrey College of Art and Design<sup>6</sup> (1978—1981) and after five years of study I graduated with an MA from the Royal College of Art (1983). During this experience both my race and my homosexuality coupled with a certain activist stance became a problem. There was no teaching about either topic, not in the studio sessions nor in the art history classes. I had to devise and seek out my own cultural studies programme. Presenting gay work in college became a problem much to

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<sup>6</sup> Now known as the University for the Creative Arts (Farnham)

my surprise. I was told by the administration and that it was only a legal sexual preference for students over the age of 21 and as I was a mature student, I could get into legal trouble. The work of the gay photographers that I had encountered in New York was never mentioned in my classes, and certainly, their pictures could never be shown. Similarly, there was no discussion of non-European photography and there was no mention of India other than in terms of the history of the colonisers gaze in the 19th century followed by the roving eye of Western photographers like Margaret Bourke-White and Henri Cartier-Bresson in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century. (Pinney, 1998)

## Homelands (2004)

### Introduction

This work is an interrogation of the geography of home crisscrossed through HIV positive eyes (I was diagnosed in July 1995); Northern India, the North-eastern part of the US and the Eastern part of Canada. These places have all been homes to me over the years and I wanted to explore making work about the journeys traversed between them. I was born (1953) and grew up in an area of New Delhi next to the tomb of a Mughal emperor, Humayun (1508-1556), an imposing prototype for the Taj Mahal, that had an atmosphere of timelessness although my suburb was built after partition (1947). My childhood neighbourhood thus had an air of permanence and gravity. However, when my parents announced that we were emigrating to Montréal, in my last year of secondary school (1969), I was excited at the prospect of a new home about which I had only fantasies derived from Hollywood cinema.

My formative early college years there were spent at a time of great social change (1970—1977) and personal identity formation for me. I came out as gay and found a new gay family and home. I also found love at my university and left with my partner for New York in 1976, and then again for London in 1977. By the 1990s, I had been following the news from Southern Africa about the HIV virus and I felt that something similar must be happening in India where the much larger population would produce an overwhelming number of cases. (Whiteside, 2002) Why were we not hearing about them? An opportunity arose via an AHRB Artist's Grant whose focus was on this project by providing me with a three-year placement at the University of Southampton. (2000—2003)

## Home

I was born in New Delhi to a North Indian father and a Tibetan mother who had settled there after the chaos of the Second World War, and the partition of India. For me this was home, and it was fairly stable as we lived in the same house for most of the years I was growing up. By my mid-teens this home had become the unquestionable centre of my universe. However, my parents were both migrants. In my mother's case, she was abandoned in India by her family who were migrant labourers in the tea plantations around Darjeeling in the North-East of India. Although my father, on the other hand, came from a typical large feudal rural family, he had been a middle child and had been sent away to military school and then to WW2, afterwards he felt unable to return to his childhood home. Whilst they were products of the Raj, English speaking and educated, they were also the young Indians being beckoned into a secular modernity that Nehru was addressing in his speeches when India became independent. (Nehru, 1994) By the late 1960s this promise was beginning to unravel.

## Migration - Montréal

In the 1960s my parents decided to migrate, and my father left first in 1967 for Montréal, Canada, the year of the Expo there. My mother and I followed in 1969. It was September, just after the Stonewall riots in New York, an event that I had never heard about but that was going to become very central to my life and work eventually. This shift could have been brutal, but I was young enough to adapt in my first year, a year I spent in high school where I very quickly learnt that my Indian heritage had no social cachet. The landscape of my

childhood had no meaning in my new life. However, there was no looking back, but fortunately, as soon as I arrived at college I found that the impact of “Stonewall” had preceded me. (Armstrong & Crage, 2006). Narratives of queer migration as homecoming, where ‘home’ is a destination rather than an origin became my central concern. I began to more fully explore the connection between exile, displacement and migration- as- homecoming found in some discussions on queer diaspora. (Fortier, 2001)

My secret sex life now had a name, ‘gay’, and was part of the sexual revolution happening around me. It also seemed very ‘cool’ and a great social improvement on being different simply because of my Indian origin. Between 1971 and 1975 I transformed into becoming Canadian and into a student gay activist. One consequence of this was that my biological family now had a rival gay family of friends and lovers with whom I was spending most of my time. My landscape was no longer restricted to the family flat and the college campus but now extended across the city into cruising places, bars and all-night dance clubs. I moved out of the parental home and created a new home where I could create a hub for my new gay activist family. Very quickly this acquired the certainty and solidity of the home left behind in Delhi. My interest in photography and film was developed here.

#### Migration – New York

In 1976, I moved to New York to study for an MBA degree but in reality, I was accompanying my partner who had found a job there. This was a temporary move, a preamble for a more permanent move to London. Although brief, my stay in New York completely transformed my life; I left business studies, in favour of photography. I found New York to be not only new and modern but also very familiar and comforting. It was more like Delhi than

Montréal. Here it seemed you could aspire to do anything and to be anyone. It was home to both photography and a very public gay culture. These surroundings were magnetic for a camera. I added a movie camera to my stills camera as everything in the city could be filmed and photographed in an infinite variety of ways. I went to study with Philippe Halsman<sup>7</sup> and Lisette Model<sup>8</sup> at the New School of Social Research. (1977) It was amazing to me that such huge figures of the mid-century were available to a novice like me. I walked the streets and loitered in the subway finding pictures everywhere and it is here that photography and contemporary art came into focus for me. There were numerous photography galleries and the collecting institutions always had a version of the modernist history of photography on display. Weekends were spent wandering through SoHo lofts and contemporary art galleries and this became my working life for a year.

#### Migration - London

I arrived in London in late 1977 and went to photography school. I finished full-time education by the summer of 1983 and had to leave the UK before I could return to live here as a resident foreigner in the beginning of 1984. London proved to be a much more difficult experience than New York. It took many years to feel at home with a social network and a familiarity of landscape that had happened so rapidly in the past. There seemed to be no equivalent public photography scene nor even a gay scene. Even contemporary art seemed to exist in remote Cork Street galleries or hidden away in artists' studios beyond my comfort zone.

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<sup>7</sup> [https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/philippe-halsman-dali-atomicus-1948](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/philippe-halsman-dali-atomicus-1948)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/lisette-model-11249>

During my RCA degree show (1983) a group of us black and Asian students got together and had a small show of our work in a separate room. Here I met the GLC<sup>9</sup> and it led to another world of local authority cultural policy making and “Black Arts.” (Bailey, Baucom, & Boyce, 2005) I became active in the world of community organisations rather than the commercial art world. Since there were no equivalent organisers/curators, my business background helped me to get involved with curating exhibitions at Camerawork (1989), at the Photographers Gallery (1990) and the City Art Gallery, Leeds (1990). I went to a lot of meetings and out of these came Autograph (1988) and then INIVA (1995). By the time I got an INIVA Franchise to curate shows in 1992 I was finally beginning to feel at home in (South) London, with an English partner with whom I owned a flat in Brixton. It soon became another hub of cultural activism and meetings and parties where our worlds of race and LGBT and art and photography came together. (Gupta, 1993)

### Place

Starting in 2000, when I embarked on this project, I began to make photographs in all these locations that I had lived in with a view to presenting them as diptychs that might be in binary opposition to each other at first glance; East-West, urban-rural and so on. My intention was also to present the subjective view of a person living with HIV. The HIV/AIDS story was being received differently in each of the places. The initial pieces that emerged were based simply on the notion that the West, where I then lived, was to be seen as the current context of my life, whereas India would be seen as slightly removed to this. India

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<sup>9</sup> The Greater London Council (GLC), was the top-tier local government administrative body for Greater London from 1965 to 1986. It spearheaded a new thinking around minorities and cultural activism and this led to funding for individuals, shows and arts organisations that became the Black Arts movement, as the language shifted from “Ethnic Minority Units” to “Race Equality Units”.



remained a place that I have strong ties to including ancestral property, but which has a mythical status as I hardly ever got to experience it for real in my adult life, its memory being served by photography and oral history. What the audience experiences then are these large-scale photographs, 'geographies' of home and a videotape representing a journey between the spaces, a personal travelogue within which a discussion takes place about being gay, Indian and HIV positive. So, while the narrative remained close to the body, the photography became liberated to explore the outside world.

#### HIV and place

HIV/AIDS had played out culturally very differently in each of the locations. In the UK, Simon Watney became a key cultural critic, writer and commentator who devoted himself to covering the epidemic. (Watney, 1987) In New York, the mythical birthplace of gay liberation, it became the 'gay plague'. Confronted by a combination of a President, Ronald Reagan, who took nearly five years before he said the word "AIDS" in public, nearly seven years before he gave a speech on a health crisis that would go on to kill more than 650,000 Americans and stigmatize even more, and the crippling costs of a private health care system gay activists responded by a new wave of activism.<sup>10</sup> Act-Up (1987—) and its sister cultural organisation Gran Fury (1988—1995), were born. In Canada, wherever the right was in power either at Province level or in a town hall, a systemic persecution of gays ensued, however since medical provision was public, the health system was not the problem. (McCaskell, 2016) In the UK, with a slower start as the issue was seen as an American problem, with the NHS the situation was similar to Canada, although the vociferous

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/mar/11/nancy-ronald-reagan-aids-crisis-first-lady-legacy>

persecution of gays by association to AIDS by the right-wing press was by far the worst of all three countries. (Watney & Gupta, 1986) India was a mystery, as there was hardly any news at all, at the start of the 1990s the initial reaction was very negative, and I made a work, “No Solutions”, about that for my exhibition and book project ‘Ecstatic Antibodies.’ (Boffin & Gupta, 1990) Then the issue slowly disappeared from view from the public domain. It became more identified as being a lower-class problem, to do with sex-workers and lonely truck-drivers and therefore of no consequence to the state. The national narrative being that the virus arrived in the coastal city of Chennai and was spread by truck drivers and sex workers along the highways of India. “Mention HIV/AIDS, and images of public hospitals, long queues of economically backward patients and government programmes to distribute free drugs come to mind. Rarely do middle-class people ... crop up.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, “private patients don’t want to go to public hospitals and be seen waiting in queues meant for HIV+ people.”<sup>12</sup> Since there were officially no gays in India, the gay question simply never arose. The American/British rhetoric of the gay plague hadn’t transcended into Africa and India perhaps because the sexuality of women and gay men was still hidden.

Commented [SG1]: Clarifying the primarily class problem around AIDS in India

## Contradictions

One of the principal aims of this project was to find an alter ego in India. Someone around my age who was gay and HIV+ whose experiences might make up the final portion of my video work. But this became impossible, although I did identify a subject, he did not feel able to be recorded on video or on audio. I had not accounted for the degree of stigma still

<sup>11</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/Is-middle-class-blind-spot-in-AIDS-policy/articleshow/10939374.cms>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

prevalent there. The overarching theme of AIDS in India was not one of 'gay plague' but one of class. I had not anticipated how derogatory that was. I had populated the video with a lot of general information about the progression of the disease in India. I had talked to activists in NGOs, I had talked to doctors who serviced NGO clinics in the field, I had talked to the doctors who headed relevant sections in large urban hospitals with regional catchment areas. I had spoken to advisors of NACO the national government's official body. And, of course, I had spoken to those who were affected. The visual narrative on the other hand was a more straightforward journey back from the city (Delhi) via the regional areas of Rajasthan and UP and finally to the ancestral village in UP. The 'gay plague' was nowhere to be seen nor the accompanying rabid homophobia, instead the government and the NGOs opened up safe spaces where 'men who have sex with men-MSM' could meet and discuss and by accident, this created a situation where male (homo)sexuality came on to the national agenda and eventually led to its decriminalisation.

#### Affected Geographies

The geographies in the photographic work then vary tremendously by class. I began to move away from thinking about the clichéd juxtaposition of East and West to something more complicated that might give an inkling of *what* was more permissible and equally importantly *where*. Although there is not a series linearity to the final set of images, there is a first image of sorts, the first juxtaposition that I arrived at and that set the tone for the entire series. It is a view of a field in my ancestral homeland occupied by a cow and in the enlargement, you can make out that her body is shielding a calf. On the right-hand side there is a self-portrait in an American interior space. (Figure 4) In my mind amongst the

many things going on in this juxtaposition is the one of public versus private. This theme has been at the centre of on-going debate in India around the decriminalising of homosexuality. The legal right to engage in consenting sexual acts in private, versus the inability of many Indians to claim a private space.



Figure 4. "Mundia Pamar, UP/Chesapeake Bay, Maryland", from the series, "Homelands" 2004

## Conclusion

Homelands began as a three-year research project on the impact of HIV/AIDS on India but ended up as being equally about an autobiographical journey home. In the video portion I retraced my original visits 'home' as an emigrant to the land of the ancestors. But in the end, I filmed my departure, now as a gay HIV positive man, there was little chance of a 'return'. However, there was a hopefulness as I arrived back into the city, Delhi, that in fact the place was in transition and that I could remain here and have some kind of engagement with its future outlook and development. With hindsight, a showing of this work in Delhi in 2004 at the India Habitat Centre, did provoke a return. By 2005, I had given up on London and made Delhi my new home.

## Mr Malhotra's Party (2012)

### Introduction

In the 1980s I worked on constructed documentary images of anonymous gay men in historic architectural spaces in Delhi (*Exiles* series).<sup>13</sup> That was a time when the terms 'gay' or



**Hauz Khas.**

It must be marvellous for you  
in the West with your bars, clubs,  
gay liberation and all that.

*Figure 5 Hauz Khas, from the series, Exiles 1987*

<sup>13</sup> 'Exiles', a photo-text project, first seen as part of 'Body Politics', an exhibition at the Photographers Gallery and a Ten.8 magazine issue. 1987

'homosexuality' were not acceptable to polite society and the media. Although there was no shortage of homosexual activity, it was completely invisible to the public eye. Back then it was a challenge for me to make a photographic series about this subject. (Figure 5) It seemed so fraught that I never returned to this theme till I came to live once again in Delhi.

Exhibiting both this series and the series, "Homelands", in 2004, I realised that there had been a sea change in public opinion, and it was time to revisit the idea that gay men exist in Delhi.

#### Mr Malhotra and The Party scene

In early 2000s India, homosexual men were lurking less in parks, and more on the Internet, and those who could afford the entrance charges also inhabited spaces such as 'private' parties. Gay nights<sup>14</sup> at local clubs<sup>15</sup> in Delhi were always sign-posted as private parties in a fictitious person's name. Attending one such night out, I noticed that the party was being hosted by a 'Mr Malhotra' and the reason why it seemed so out of place was that it was such a common name, one that conjured up the hard-working Punjabi families that had arrived after Partition and that had made Delhi what it is now. Its mundaneness could not be further away from the offer of the underground glamour of a hedonistic gay party. It immediately struck me as a good title for the project as we were all guests of an imaginary party, which I called 'Mr Malhotra's Party'.

#### The project

With these images, I was trying to visualise this latest queer space through a series of photographic portraits of real people who identify their sexuality as 'queer'. (Watson, 2005)

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<sup>14</sup> [https://broadly.vice.com/en\\_us/article/wjen5x/we-exist-inside-indias-secretive-gay-nightlife-scene](https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/wjen5x/we-exist-inside-indias-secretive-gay-nightlife-scene)

<sup>15</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/deep-focus/In-homophobic-India-the-gay-party-is-rocking/articleshow/52813210.cms>

This time as opposed to when 'Exiles' was being made, people look straight into the camera and we see around them local aspects of their geography. This time they are willing to identify themselves. (Figure 6)



Figure 5. Akshara, from the series "Mr Malhotra's Party" 2007-

There was a rising sense of decriminalisation in the air by 2005, and this was confirmed by 2009. (Narain & Bhan, 2006) Already by 2008 public Pride marches had started taking place so it seemed like a perfect time to look at LGBT people in the eye.

## Identities

Meanwhile, politically the very identity of same sex desire is a contested one in India. The notion of the word “gay” as used very casually by urban men across the country doesn’t seem to fit the wider extent of actual sexual practices it represents, as the definition is bound to western social norms. The term “kothi” has come to be used to refer to the indigenous Indian homosexual man. This identity is now widely used in the literature to fight AIDS.<sup>16</sup> It describes an effeminate man in search of an ideal masculine (heterosexual) partner. So, it’s a search that cannot be fulfilled. In one sense this is a key marker of one homosexual tradition that occurs in cultures in the West too. If by definition one is searching for a heterosexual husband figure, then the very act of consummation would unravel the fantasy, as by having sex with you the (heterosexual) husband would reveal their own homosexuality. e.g. the case of Quentin Crisp in the UK is a well-known marker. (Crisp, 1996) “Hijras” who are sometimes loosely called ‘trans’ in a Western sense are a unique South Asian identity that has a historical place in society and have been widely accepted. The hijra (eunuch/transvestite) is an institutionalized third gender role in India. Hijra are neither male nor female but contain elements of both. As devotees of the Mother Goddess Bahuchara Mata, their sacred powers are contingent upon their sexuality. In reality, however, many hijras are prostitutes. This sexual activity undermines their culturally valued sacred role. (Nanda, 1985)

## The inclusion of women

Although my fledgling work in the 1970s in Montréal included women as part of my friends and family networks, by the 1980s I found myself in a more separatist political framework in



London where it was politically correct for Black artists to make work about Black people especially in the figurative arts and particularly in film and photography. Similarly, women artists were expected to make feminist work about women and I responded by mostly making work about the position of gay men. It was not until after Clause 28 (1988) which had inadvertently brought men and women together that I have felt able to make pictures of women. This began with the work, “‘Pretended’ Family Relationships” around 1988. Arriving in India in the 2000s I found that gay politics was very much a coming together of feminist groups and gay men’s groups that were forming at HIV Community centres in the metropolitan centres.

Everybody was focused on the decriminalisation of homosexuality in India, a reading down of Section 377. Representatives from all the various groups created a super group called, “Voices Against 377”. Socially it was harder for men and women to spend time in the same spaces. In any case, there were a few spaces, however the men went to late-night bars that hosted gay nights as private parties to which fewer women felt able or safe to go to. However, unlike London, women were not excluded from gay male places, so those who were able to go did go. The people who were there for a good night out had to pay the high entrance charges which was beyond the means of most men in the city including nearly all the more visible underclass of the ‘hijras’ and ‘kothis.’ I joined an activist group that used culture to generate discussion around issues of queer and rights. This was a group that had emerged amongst graduate students at the local university and was beginning to make inroads into the city. The group was mixed gender and became a primary source of models when I was conceiving the project. Inevitably it became about both women and men, even though in my mind, I was referring it to the earlier project “Exiles.”

## Reclaiming the city

In this project, I was very much following in the footsteps of “Exiles”, and it was exciting for me to make something that would signify the changes that had occurred for gay men in the intervening twenty years. In “Exiles” I had used the framework of cruising sites, that meant going to the actual locations in the city where gay men went to meet each other. More recently in the project Homelands location had played a significant role in making pictures. Choosing in each case which landscape needed to be photographed. An even earlier project, Christopher Street, had its entire focus on one location which also happened to be the main public gay thoroughfare in New York at the time. (Gupta, 2018)

My problem in Delhi was that there was no single road or avenue that was identified as being frequented primarily by gay men and lesbians. Therefore, I made a different visual point in the photographs which was to show that queer people are everywhere in the city. So, I decided that rather than going to a gay place I would locate my subjects in the neighbourhoods where they lived or worked. This then began to give me a queer mapping of the city. I could tell immediately from this that my network that had originated in the activist group was limited to the southern suburbs of the city. I then had to choose whether I would seek out individuals in different geographies within the same city, locations that would define them socio-economically. This presented a new problem for me. Working my way through a social network meant that I had a much greater degree of familiarity with my subjects even though they may not be used to having their picture taken on the street. The latter group was less familiar to me but more familiar with the location as they spent more time on street corners.

### The changing law

On July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009 I found myself with my activist friends at the Delhi High Court awaiting the judgment on the reading down of Section 377. It was read down much to our disbelief, so many people including me had thought that this kind of change was not possible in our lifetimes - there was euphoria. But this euphoria was short lived as four years later this reading down was challenged in the Supreme Court and reversed. In September 2018, the Supreme Court finally ruled in favour of decriminalising consensual sexual behaviour between adults.<sup>17</sup> In between however, it had the unfortunate effect that many people came out and were then criminalised again. The public debate had also brought to light a deeply buried homophobia that was now becoming more overtly active compared to the ‘don’t ask don’t tell years.’

### Gays versus queers

In the pre-liberalisation days when I had photographed ‘Exiles,’ some urban, middle and upper middle-class men were saying that they were gay. Fewer women were saying that they were lesbian. Ruth Vanita has noted in her memoirs that "the women’s movement also fostered an exaggerated fear of being labeled man-hating and Westernized if we were associated with lesbianism." (Vanita, 2011) It felt like the 1970s gay liberation movements of the West had not really been allowed to arrive in India by its women’s movement. The term gay being used by men felt a little meaningless at the time as it was not tied to any domestic sexual or political revolution, it just felt like an adopted label by some, as an expression of interest in homosexual relations.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-45429664>

On the other hand, the 2000s brought more knowledgeable student bodies whom had been schooled in a culture of sexuality and gender that came out of feminist and HIV activist groups in the 1990s, along with a growing awareness of the academic discipline of queer theory (Watson, 2005) often related to debates around Western visual culture, (Rogoff, 1998) As the first queer activist generation spilled out of the universities and took to the streets of the cities, queer as the preferred term had replaced LGBT. The media hostile to LGBT till the mid 2000s became rapidly more liberal and very soon began using the global term 'queer', even in non-English language media the word queer was transliterated as there was no native equivalent. Whereas the term gays and lesbians had denoted something immorally limited to sexual activity and therefore not Indian and to be hidden, the term queer quickly found acceptance as its larger meaning was understood to be questioning of one's sexuality rather than one's actual sexual preference for the same sex.

#### Conclusion/ A document of resistance

Mr Malhotra's Party was made initially as a celebration of the more accepting liberal moralities of an India entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as a way of making images of the inhabitants of a subculture that had been unseen. It coincided with a period when increasing numbers of (young) people felt able to come out. This project was a rebuttal of the earlier 'Exiles' project when everyone was in hiding. Then suddenly first the law reverted to its original setting of criminalising homosexual relationships then all the people who came out found that they could not go back in. It now seemed essential to continue this project in defiance of the law and as a form of resistance. Whatever the outcome, and despite the right-wing hysteria of the present regime, people continue to come out into the open and demand their rights to be free.

This was a demand that was finally met by the courts in 2018.<sup>18</sup> According to the activist Gautam Bhan what this means is, "...fifteen years ago, we were trying to open a window. Today, we have a chance to say, you have to respect me from the beginning of our conversation. The starting assumption of our lives will be equal dignity, and that is what the law can give you."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/sc-verdict-on-section-377-all-you-need-to-know/articleshow/65695884.cms>

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2018/09/06/section-377-verdict-why-gay-rights-activist-gautam-bhan-spent-14-years-fighting-this-legal-battle\\_a\\_23518691/](https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2018/09/06/section-377-verdict-why-gay-rights-activist-gautam-bhan-spent-14-years-fighting-this-legal-battle_a_23518691/)

## Sun City. (2012)

### Introduction

Whilst living in Delhi, a team of curators from the Centre Pompidou in Paris came to visit me. (2009) They invited me to make a work in Paris for their exhibition, “Paris, Delhi, Bombay...”. (2011) I immediately thought of *La Jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962) (Figure 7) and a gay bathhouse called “Sun City” that I visited. I remembered it because it was full of Indian arts and crafts kitsch. I had even taken a photo of the entrance to use in a different series of works called, “Love and Light.” (2009) I outlined a proposal to make a series of film stills, a reversal of ‘Sun City’, that was about an immigrant from India who lived in the bath house and sought refuge in a fantasy love affair in the outside world. A proposition made complicated by his lack of language.

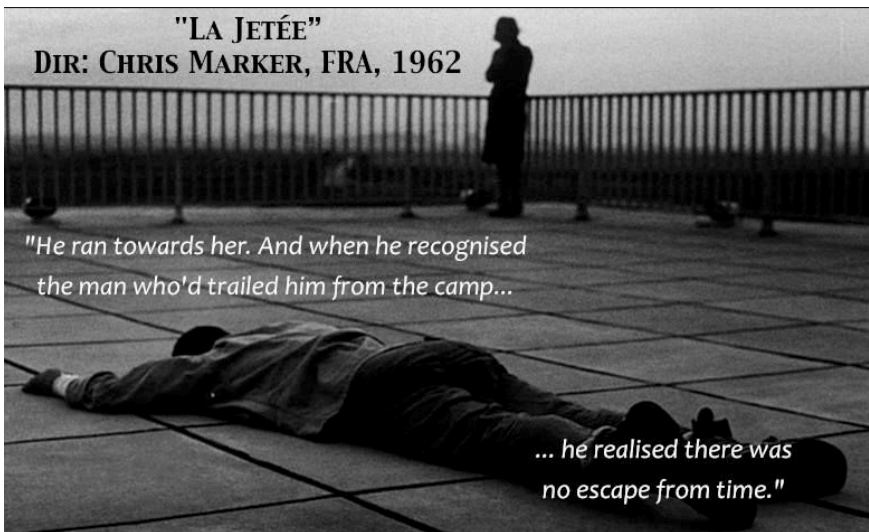


Figure 6 poster for 'La Jetée'

The production took place in Paris for a month (July 2010) working with a production company to cast my ‘movie’ and hire the technicians. I was able to bring my camera assistant

from Delhi. Our main location was the bath house and it was only available when it was closed for just a few hours every morning. Not having had the opportunity to research it properly every morning became a race to both shoot a scene and plan the requirements for the scene for the next day. The only preparation I had been able to make in advance was to download key frames from the movie and collect an array of gay homoerotic photography from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. (Ellenzweig, 1992) I used the film stills as a storyboard, the historical photographs as a study of posing and placing the body.

#### Project narrative

This project was a fictional narrative loosely based on the 1962 film, *La Jetée* by Chris Marker. We can view it as some 'stills' from a film that is 'missing'. The original elliptical form has been retained so the 'hero' sees his own death in the 'beginning' and we return to that scene as reality in the 'end.' The nuclear apocalypse of the original has been replaced with the on-going holocaust of HIV/AIDS. The heterosexual possibility of romantic love, which drives the original character, has been replaced with an immigrant, homosexual one. Our 'hero' arrives in Paris, Orly (from India) to be greeted by his French lover, a scene witnessed by the only woman in the pictures and she has an approving smile. She could be simply passing by or standing in for his mother or a guardian angel. In the remaining pictures he alternates between living out a romantic relationship above ground or in the open, and another life where he discovers the gay bath house and slowly progresses towards increasing degrees of intimacy with a series of anonymous partners. Whether his death is actually related to this experimentation, we cannot know for certain. Our hero is always highlighted with a yellow light. (Figure 8) He is both sacred and innocent. The actors in the bath house scenes are arranged in postures borrowed from the history of photography - Baron von Gloeden (Germany late 19th C), George Platt Lynes (New York 1930s-40s). The romantic

scenes are set in various references to the original film - a park, a department store, a museum, and an apartment. In his romantic world, he is reading Victor Hugo, trying to overcome his linguistic and cultural barriers. However, in the bath house he finds a kind of democracy as communication does not involve speech and everyone wears the same blue towel. In both worlds he is new, and uncertain. In India, where he came from, neither situation is possible, so both are new to him - there are no safe spaces for casual sex and no possibility of an over ground and 'out' romantic lifestyle with a same-sex partner. However, underlying all this, both in France and in India (and elsewhere in the world) gay men are trying to come to terms with the opposing political choices of promiscuity and the institution of marriage.



Figure 7. "Untitled" from "Sun City" 2011

### La Jetée and the possibility of love

I used this film because it has remained in my own memory as a unique exploration of the relationship between still and moving image. As Janet Harbord writes, Photography, viewed



through cinema, becomes a strange ‘pass-time’, detached from the mores of amateur and professional codes of practice, as well as from Roland Barthes’s ruminations on its essential features and his preference for the photograph over cinema. Comparable to André Bazin’s idea of cinema, Barthes’s conception of photography saw in the photographic record an inscription of time, a mark of mortality and simultaneously a defence against it. (Harbord, 2009) It worked successfully as being between a nuclear holocaust and idea of the passing of one human life. It appealed to me because as Mavor has said, *La Jetée* is a fairy tale. It begins as a story of impossible courtly love. (Mavor, 2012)

Love as subject matter was beginning to attract me around this time as living in India meant that so much energy was being expended in the discussions around the law (Section 377) and the possibility of two consenting adults having sex in private. It felt as if everything else was insignificant. Victor Burgin quotes Chris Marker, It is this image that taught a child of seven how a face filling the screen was suddenly the most precious thing in the world, it taught the child what love is. (Burgin, 2004) Marker was talking about the opening scene in the film where the woman is looking at a scene of a man’s death. He goes on to reveal, “for this grown up child, cinema and woman remained two inseparable notions.” Of course, in ‘Sun City’ the possibility of romantic love represented by the woman is replaced by a man. But the woman is not replaced entirely; she is still there, watching him arrive at Orly.

In relation to the idea of film and photography Mavor goes on to claim that a photograph is a trace of the death of the moment held forevermore. Cinema is unstoppable real time, reeled over and over, as if caught in an endless quest forward even when it is depicting the past. (Mavor, 2012) For me, this is a suitable metaphor for our immigrant hero who we know will be forever tied to his motherland, a place he will remember as a series of images even moving images, all the while being watched over by the woman, the love that he remembers.

In a psychoanalytic perspective, the maternal body is the support of the prototype of this object. In considering the passage of the infant, and small child, into that differentiated world in which it exists separately from its mother. (Burgin, 2004)

### Melodrama and a religious context

I was also drawn to the beginning of this particular narrative because of its reference to the ideals of innocence, courtly love and hope. For Mavor, *La Jetée* gives us that hope, that we might just find that “there, I was” is a place that just might be found....”(Mavor, 2012) Our hero is always highlighted with a yellow light. He is both sacred in a religious context for this reading and innocent of experience. Especially the experiences that await him in Sun City, the bath house. But in the arrival image we see that a woman who seems to be looking out for him witnesses it. It is important as she is the only woman in the whole narrative and is invisible in the rest of the frames. We have to imagine that she is continuing to both guard and witness, and might even be his mother, someone he’s probably very close to and someone he is constantly in touch with. In the melodrama of the remaining pictures he alternates between living out a romantic relationship above ground or in the open, and another life where he discovers the gay bath house and slowly progresses towards increasing degrees of intimacy with a series of anonymous partners. Whether his death is related to this experimentation, we cannot know for certain.

Melodrama has been a crucial part of Indian cinema and also a genre that has been used to great effect by European and American directors to convey underlying sexual tensions in a way that could get past the censors as well as allude to ‘unnatural desires.’ Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Fox and His Friends* (1975) was an early study in the claustrophobia of gay social relationships in a repressive society as witnessed by an ‘immigrant’, in this case a rural

boy who comes to the big city and becomes ‘corrupted’. (Dawson, 2015) Fassbinder was following in the footsteps of fellow German, Douglas Sirk, who had by then been recognised by the critics. (Evans, 2013) More contemporary directors continue to follow this trend; Todd Haynes, Almodóvar, and so on.

#### HIV/AIDS

Rock Hudson, one of Sirk’s stars, ironically, became the poster boy for AIDS. (Figure 9) Larson in his roundup of significant moments in the LGBT history of Southern California notes that in 1985 actor Rock Hudson died from AIDS. (Larson, 2008) As a Hollywood star this made the news all over the world as his friend Elizabeth Taylor took up the cause and triggered a wave of sympathy for the first time in mainstream America. It seemed obvious that the cold war threat of a nuclear holocaust needed to be replaced by a different and equally life-threatening pandemic, that of the HIV virus. Back in the 1980s and 1990s it seemed like we gay men in the west were at the forefront of being engulfed by an incurable virus spread by the very thing that defined our lifestyle – sex.



Figure 8. The AIDS death of Rock Hudson, Los Angeles Times, October 3, 1985, <http://www.rarenewspapers.com/view/651977>

Sex, which had been the subject of liberalising struggles through the 1960s and 1970s. The whole gay liberation concept had been built on the notion of eschewing the monogamous family unit safe in their houses, reinventing themselves every generation, accumulating capital. Wilful promiscuity promised a way out and a new community and networks built around friends and lovers. AIDS came along and gave the religious right and the media a handy weapon with which to beat this revolution back towards the acceptable norms of monogamy and marriage. Bath houses were closed in the centres of gay liberation – New York (1985) and San Francisco (1984). Only in Europe did they remain open where the thinking seemed to be that it was better to try and cluster all the high-risk activity under one roof where it could be isolated from the rest of the community and of course, its actors be educated about safer sex.

However, the pioneering critical writing work came from a transatlantic exchange between writers and critics such as Simon Watney and Craig Owen (1983—1987). In his preface to Owens' collected writings Watney writes about how he tried to show how marginalised groups are subordinated in different ways. He was profoundly distrustful of liberal humanism and its claim to speak of and for a universal "human nature." He goes on to point out "how Owens' work had consequences that he himself could not have foreseen, not least in the emergence of the widespread cultural activism that arose in response to the AIDS crisis."(Owens, 1992) Amongst the figures Owens references is Stuart Marshall<sup>20</sup> the film and video maker in London for whom I did stills photography as in Figure 10.

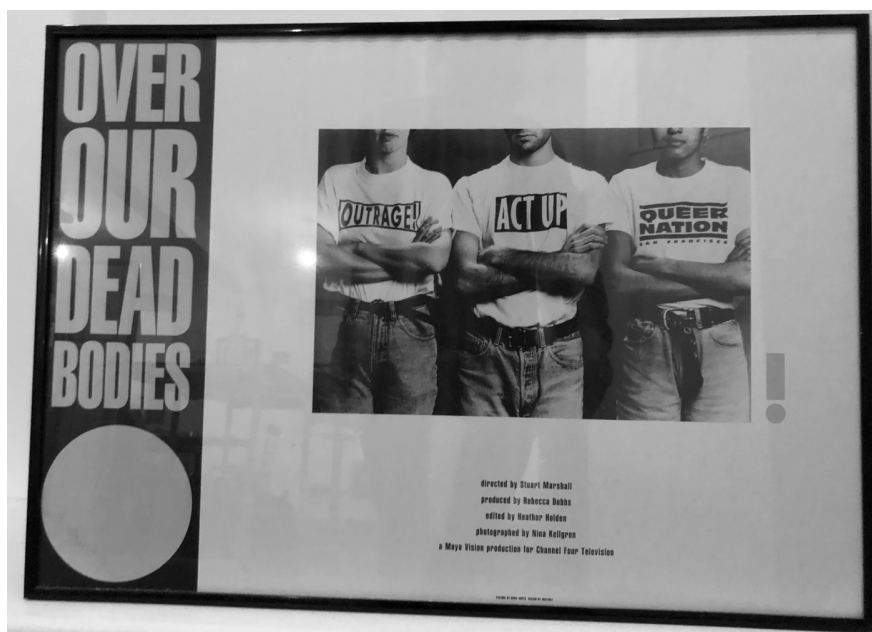


Figure 9. Poster for "Over our Dead Bodies" d. Stuart Marshall 1991

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/stuart\\_marshall/index.html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/stuart_marshall/index.html)

Working with art history and the history of photography

Taking a cue from the film directors of the 1970s and 1980s who revived melodrama, I decided to work with the actors in the bathhouse scenes in a very stylised way so that they are arranged in postures borrowed from the history of photography - Baron Wilhelm Von Gloeden (Figure 11. Germany late 19th C) (Von Gloeden, 1987), who worked in Greece and Sicily and George Platt Lynes (New York 1930s-40s). (Brown, 2017) Von Gloeden was famous in his own time but was eclipsed for almost a century partly because in a series of posthumous obscenity raids that are variously dated to 1933, 1936, 1939, and 1940, the Italian Fascist police destroyed or confiscated between one and two thousands of von



Figure 10. . Baron Wilhelm Von Gloeden (1856-1931) *Tre ragazzi sulla terrazza di Wilhelm von Plueschow a Napoli*

Gloeden's delicate glass-plate negatives. (Goldman, 2006)

Platt Lynes (Figure 12) worked as a successful New York photographer and his private homoerotic work being produced closer to the liberalising post war era survived more easily and has become widely available and referenced today. The romantic scenes in 'Sun City' are a reference to the original movie - the park, the department store, the museum, and the apartment. In his romantic world, our hero is reading Victor Hugo, trying to overcome his linguistic and cultural barriers. However, in the bath house he finds a kind of democracy as



*Figure 11. George Platt Lynes, New York, c. 1930*

communication does not involve speech, and everyone wears the same blue towel. Bodily communication/cultural differences and similarities. In both worlds he is new, and uncertain. In India, where he came from, neither situation is possible, so both are new to him - there are no safe spaces for casual sex and no possibility of an over ground and 'out' romantic lifestyle with a same-sex partner.

### Conclusion: Promiscuity versus marriage

However, underlying all this, both in France and in India (and elsewhere in the world) gay men are trying to come to terms with the opposing political choices of promiscuity and the institution of marriage. Binaries occur in the film as well, as Mavor says, “It is dystopia, with the hope of utopia. Or it is utopia, cut by the threat of dystopia.” She adds, “Utopia for (Marker) is the escape from both anamnesis (a recollection of past events) and amnesia (loss of memory) by living neither in the past nor in the future, but impossibly in the moment.”(Mavor, 2012) This has been the underlying contradiction of modern gay life, to live in the moment, to have neither a past nor a future, to look towards romantic love as an ideal knowing full well that it is not utopia.



## The New Pre-Raphaelites. (2008)

### Introduction

In 2006, I set up a photo studio as an art installation during an art opening in Delhi. There I made a photograph of a man lounging in a green sari. Soon after, on a chance visit to the Tate in London, I came across a new hang of the Pre-Raphaelite paintings from the collection. (Prettejohn, 2012) I used to think of them as being camp and kitschy but this time I was struck first by the vividness of the colours and then by the ambivalent sexuality of their subject matter. Both form and content had survived one hundred and fifty years and are still speaking to a contemporary audience. Returning to India, I felt that here was a collective body of work, a movement that might successfully be re-worked for the local context. The context being that Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalised “unnatural” sex between consenting adults in India, was successfully challenged by a landmark ruling at the Delhi High Court on July 2, 2009.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, the control of sexuality was intrinsically tied to the governance of the state, something the British understood. (Puri Jyoti, 2016) It was not of indigenous origin as a piece of legislation, its origins lay in the period of British colonial rule. A period that also gave birth to the Pre-Raphaelite movement in England in response to Victorian codes of morality and a need to classify human behaviour. (Marshall, 1990) A consequence of the application of this law was that there was no visibility for homosexual relationships in the Indian sub-continent. What the Delhi High Court ruled was that there was a division between constitutional morality and private morality, and that the human rights of the individual

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/Delhi-High-Court-strikes-down-Section-377-of-IPC/article16546323.ece>

citizen to choose his or her own partner were being violated under the existing status quo. In cultural terms this history meant there was virtually no public imagery referencing same-sex desire since the pre-Islamic golden age of temple building. (Hayward Gallery, 1982)

This body of work began with a purposefully well-known reference to western art history, Manet's Olympia (Figure 13) by making another photograph of a man lounging in a green sari. (Figure 14) It is a painting that has gained a certain international currency. It has become one of those images which is being reproduced globally to such an extent, that it and its imitations have permeated throughout popular cultures around the world to the point that a man in a sari in that pose is instantly recognisable as a reference to art



Figure 12. Manet, Edouard, "Olympia" 1863. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France. RF 644

to an Indian audience. For me another crucial requirement was that the work should be understandable in both India and in the West, the places where it would be seen.



Figure 13. "Untitled #13", from the series, "The New Pre-Raphaelites" Delhi 2009

### The Pre-Raphaelites

Having made the first image, I then returned to the catalogue of Pre-Raphaelite imagery to start selecting specific works to refashion in my studio supported by an initial grant from Autograph.<sup>22</sup> (2008) According to the Tate, the name Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood arose from the groups' opposition to the Royal Academy's promotion of the Renaissance master Raphael. They were also in revolt against the triviality of the immensely popular genre painting of the time. Inspired by the theories of John Ruskin, who urged artists to 'go to nature', they believed in an art of serious subjects treated with maximum realism. (Prettejohn, 2000) Their principal themes were initially religious, but they also used subjects from literature and poetry, particularly those dealing with love and death. They also explored

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<sup>22</sup> <https://autograph.org.uk>

modern social problems. After initial heavy opposition the Pre-Raphaelites became highly influential, with a second phase of the movement from about 1860, inspired particularly by the work of Rossetti, making a major contribution to symbolism".<sup>23</sup>

### The New Pre-Raphaelites

I was inspired by this mixture of issues dealing with love and death as well as modern social problems and the whole being rendered in this very melodramatic and detailed colourful style. It seemed an ideal form to depict how such rich and ornate cultures such as the ones in India were trying to grapple with a new generation's rush towards and an embrace of queer sexuality. Of course, this same western tradition had already incorporated elements of Aboriginal, African and Asian art within it, so it did not seem very far-fetched. It also seemed right that it originated in the same place as the colonisers and their need to categorise everything. Going back to classical Hindu sculptural traditions did not make as useful a starting point for this work that originated in nineteenth century values. However, it is worth remembering that scholars have pointed out that India's art history does reflect depictions of same sex desire going back centuries. (Kidwai & Vanita, 2000)

### Five particular works

In all I made about fifteen works based upon individual paintings, here I would like to describe five of the originals to give an idea of how I went about selecting them. Some of the originals are religious although I preferred to avoid those, and some are social commentaries, which seemed more appropriate in the Indian context.

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/pre-raphaelite>

'The Meeting of Jacob and Rachel', (William Dyce, 1806–1864). (Figure 15) appealed to me because of the degree of passion and desire on display. I substituted Jacob and Rachel with male models and further tried to complicate their story by making one of them of African origin. (Figure 16)



Figure 14. Dyce, William, "The Meeting of Jacob and Rachel", New Walk Museum & Art Gallery, Leicester Arts and Museums Service 1850

I restaged *Woman's Mission: Companion of Manhood*, (George Elgar Hicks 1863)<sup>24</sup> using two women. The more 'feminine' figure remains fully clothed, but I chose to reveal the breasts of the female model playing the masculine figure standing in for manhood in a role reversal of photographic gender norms.

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<sup>24</sup> Tate



Figure 15. "Untitled #5" from the series, *The New Pre-Raphaelites 2009*

Broken Vows, (Philip Hermogenes Calderon 1856),<sup>25</sup> was a classic and universal theme of unrequited love that lends itself to the melodrama of Indian gay life modelled as it is on classic Bollywood cinema. It seems that “disappointed love was a popular theme in Victorian painting...” as well.<sup>26</sup>

The Bridesmaid (John Everett Millais (1851),<sup>27</sup> inspired me to use the Indian woman’s use of long flowing locks to suggest chastity before marriage, as Tim Barringer has said of the painting, “while the orange blossom pinned to her chest is a symbol of chastity, the woman is contemplating with fear and fascination future sexual consummation. This is hinted at by the phallic shape of the sugar caster, disrupting the work’s symmetrical composition, a symbol

<sup>25</sup> Tate

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/calderon-broken-vows-n05780>

<sup>27</sup> The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

(though presumably not a conscious one on Millais's part) of the man whom she is hoping to visualise."<sup>28</sup>

Chatterton (Henry Wallis, 1856)<sup>29</sup> told a story that was essential to the context of the suicide of a young romantic poet. Not that young, romantic poets surrounded me, but suicide among both queer women and men in India was very prevalent. People had no way out of their social situations. The heightened romanticism was of course a reference to the burgeoning queer sensibility. What also made this painting significant was the way in which the Pre-Raphaelite norm, 'truth to nature', was followed, "Wallis has attempted to recreate the same attic room in Gray's Inn where Chatterton had killed himself."<sup>30</sup>

Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene, Simeon Solomon (1864),<sup>31</sup> is of course the most obvious example in the sense that both the artist and subject matter are openly queer. It was a simple matter to replace the models by using a local lesbian couple, in this case Indian and white American. A further complication was added by using their real-life son as a cherub figure in place of the deer on a pedestal in the background. This accidentally led to a number of issues to do with depicting nude children and the picture is often not showable, something I hadn't expected. Ironically Solomon himself suffered at the hands of the law when on 11 February 1873 (he) was arrested for homosexual offences. Thereafter he was shunned by the very artists who had encouraged his daring subject matter.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Tim Barringer, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, London 1998, p.92.

<sup>29</sup> Tate

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wallis-chatterton-n01685>

<sup>31</sup> Tate

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/solomon-sappho-and-erinna-in-a-garden-at-mytilene-t03063> oh

### From A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep to Notes on Camp

The prose-poem, *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep* (1871), an early text by Solomon, now considered a primary text for gay studies, was revived by Neil Bartlett in 1987 as a solo performance at the Battersea Arts Centre and in a derelict warehouse in Bermondsey that I can remember seeing. The text tells of the journey of a narrator and his soul through a nocturnal landscape where they experience visions of various states and conditions of love until they meet the figure of *Sacramentum Amoris* bearing the 'Very Love' in a crystal vessel. Many of the literary images appear in pictorial form in paintings and drawings of the 1870s and supplied Solomon with subjects for the rest of his life as an artist.... It is now seen as an important document in activating modern debates around homosexuality.<sup>33</sup>

Solomon wrote this two years prior to his arrest in a public lavatory for attempting to commit sodomy with an unemployed stableman.<sup>34</sup> This was the same law that the British had exported to India and implemented under Lord Macaulay in 1860.<sup>35</sup> In the century and a half that this draconian law has been in place, the overwhelming silence has only been punctured by the use of camp; Oscar Wilde, Quentin Crisp and so on. Already more than fifty years ago, Susan Sontag published her "Notes on Camp" in which she listed a total of 58 attributes. She states, "the essence of camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration.... The hallmark of camp is the spirit of extravagance." This then is what seemed to me a good starting point to make imagery about how queer people were surviving and beginning to reveal themselves in India around 2009. The idea for the series, 'The new Pre-Raphaelites' was born. It was going to give me a way to arrange the Indian body set against this

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<sup>33</sup> Solomon, Simeon, "A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep" 1871, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, Accession Number 2005.3489.96

<sup>34</sup> <https://dantisamor.wordpress.com/2017/07/08/a-vision-of-love-revealed-in-sleep/>

<sup>35</sup> <http://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/the-long-twisted-road-of-section-377/>



background of a queer art history albeit imported, but as camp points out it is all about sensibility. The former coloniser's own (queer) hidden art history collided with a sensibility around camp with its own localised history to visualise this series of photographs.

Sontag further pointed out that “the androgyny is certainly one of the great figures of camp sensibility.” She points to the “swooning, slim, sinuous figures of Pre-Raphaelite painting and poetry.”(Sontag Susan, 2009) Elizabeth Prettejohn writing in the gender and sexuality chapter of her extensive Tate catalogue on the Pre-Raphaelites talks at length about the dual needs to portray a model as naturally as possible whilst simultaneously depicting a historical personality such as ‘Chatterton’, as well as the androgynous quality of the depictions emphasising the feminine qualities of the men and the masculine qualities of the women. She writes, “it would be wrong to draw an absolute dividing line between Solomon’s homoerotic images and the pictures of his heterosexual friends.” She quotes the art historian Colin Cruise, “the figure is sexualised not simply in relation to another figure male or female, but in relation to the male himself, for himself. The dreamy expression may thus indicate not simply the figure’s erotic availability to the desiring spectator, male or female, but an interiority with which the viewer, again either male or female, may imaginatively gaze.”(Prettejohn, 2000)

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#### Conclusion/Mythologies and contemporary realities in India

Of course, Susan Sontag famously also stated that camp was apolitical that it could only be an aesthetic statement, a view for which she has been challenged over the years by many queer critics. Moe Meyer defines camp as “a uniquely “queer parodic praxis” through which queers generate conditions for social agency and social visibility in the teeth of the dominant order.”(Meyer, 1994) Ann Pellegrini in her lengthy analysis, “After Sontag: Future Notes on Camp” points out that when Sontag “de-gays camp,” she denies a precious form of queer

resilience, imagination, and, I want to urge, “moral seriousness” in the face of vulnerability.”(Pellegrini, 2008) Meanwhile camp elements in India have enabled queer people to survive and they also have a serious overtone. Hijras have been part of Indian culture for centuries much before the British arrived, however colonisation did see a decline in their status and fortunes. Although governed by a more positive legal framework today their form of patronage is in decline. However, since the 1990s and especially with the arrival of AIDS a wider public discourse has begun that includes them around the larger question of non-normative queer sexualities. Camp in the form of urban lifestyles influenced by popular culture and the cinema has in the past successfully enabled queer men and women to create invisible networks of support and resistance to the dominant hetero-normative codes. With this series I was hoping to visualise this political resistance before it gets engulfed by popular culture and consumerism as has happened in the West and loses its political nuances as we look forward to life after decriminalisation of same sex desire one more time in India.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/sep/06/india-lgbt-homophobia-section-377>

## Conclusion

What this commentary has identified are the consequences of two kinds of migration and their intersection. There has been the physical movement between countries and cultures, and the singular psychological movement towards a gay identity. When I arrived in the first alien place, Montréal, I was actually coming home to an identity that was not really possible in the homeland I had just left. This took me a while to realise and it was done with the help of cultural production in the name of activism.

Emerging into the London of the early 1980s, it became my mission to forge a practice to bring my twin interests of race and homosexuality into art historical discourse. From my earlier activism, I knew I had to find like-minded people so that we could organise and do it by ourselves rather than rely on mainstream curators, researchers, historians to tell our stories in galleries, museums and universities. I felt that my intersecting interests of race and sexuality were not being served at the time by the art world as it was absorbed in gendered (heterosexual) difference theory, and therefore I needed to look elsewhere and particularly at my own communities as repositories of new knowledge.

The Homelands project looked back and tried to identify the different strands of memory, place and sense of security that had provided home over the years. Security was becoming paramount as the body had become incurably ill, and the Black cultural project in London was no longer sustainable or sustaining. It led to another migration, this time back to where I had originally come from, but I was returning with a well-established gay identity. I could not live again in an internal exile and set about identifying the new queer people around me in the city.

Mr Malhotra's Party project marked a remarkable shift in Indian identities, not only were these new young lesbian and gay people out and proud but they were moving swiftly on and embracing on the more theoretical notion of queer. Originating in graduate school the term was soon spreading into the city and then into the media and the city being the capital city the media was the national media. Before long everyone was 'queer' but only a few understood the theory. Heteronormativity was out, and the gender queer body was in. All being spread by social media. The term heteronormativity was first introduced by (Seidman, 1991) and draws on Foucault's (1991) History of Sexuality, "heterosexuality is built on the exclusion, repression and repudiation of homosexuality.... Furthermore, gay identity constructions reinforce the dominant hetero/homo sexual code with its heteronormativity" (Seidman, 1991). Judith Butler (Butler, 1999) quotes Foucault's claim, 'the rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of (hetero)sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasure'(Foucault, 1978). Butler elaborates that 'bodies were no longer thought or experienced in terms of sexual difference.' While the Indian government prevaricated about the legal situation, the mobile phone revolution provided people power to the cause. There has now been a decade of Pride parades in a very conservative society where most people still have arranged marriages and astrologers decide wedding dates.

Invited to locate an Indian in Paris by the Centre Pompidou for a new work, I came up with "Sun City" which told the fictional tale of an émigré arriving at Orly to enact a queer lifestyle that was impossible in India. Between love and romance on the one hand and promiscuity in a bath house on the other. Located within a framework provided by "La Jetée" it allowed me to refer the story to a well-known artwork and give the protagonist a theoretical past if not a real one. The apocalyptic disaster was AIDS, but sex needed no language and hence no

interpretation. The story while Indian was played out in well-known western tropes, between still and moving image, between race and desire. The reception to it in India was very dramatic, police were summoned to the opening and the work was deemed to be against “Hindu culture”. A very serious charge in our troubled times. It led to yet another emigration. This homeland was not ready to accept the reality of being queer just the theory of it - the boundaries of sexuality continue to be policed.

Documenting real people in real places as in Mr Malhotra’s Party was very well but underlying everything in Delhi was a sense of extreme restlessness. The state and the family still ruled sexuality. What we were witnessing was just a foray into how to be queer by a small group of privileged, young people who had the economic power and the social influence to defy both state and family. Everyone had to remain invisible, in fact in a contradictory fashion, coming out was played down, despite the parades. People continued living discreetly multiple lifestyles in the face of sexual repression. The Pre-Raphaelite paintings inspired me to visualise this moment when queer passions were stirring but finding little actual acceptance. The work itself has had a chequered legacy with different forms of censorship in different parts of the world.

Finally, in a remarkable shift in India, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of September 2018 the state has stepped back and allowed the Courts to declare that every citizen has an equal right to choose their sexuality and gender. A lifetime of activism and cultural activism by countless people seems to have borne fruit at last. Now it just remains to be seen if the state will allow this shift to pass without further control and interventions. Will it stop censoring cultural production and intellectual thought? Will I be tempted once more to reverse the latest emigration and return to the point of origin?

END

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## List of Art Works

### Homelands

Series Title: *Homelands*

Image Titles: *Untitled*, Numbered #1—15

Medium: Pigment Archival Prints

Dimensions: 23 x 59 inches

Year of Image: 2000—2003

Year of Prints: 2004

Video: (A World Without) Pity

Duration: 30 mins

Format: Colour 4:3

### Exhibited

John Hansard Gallery, University of Southampton 2003

India Habitat Centre, New Delhi 2004

London Print Studio, London 2004

Stephen Bulger Gallery, Toronto

Sepia International, New York

Canadian Museum for Contemporary Photography, Ottawa 2005

Bombay Art Gallery, Mumbai 2007

Belfast Exposed, Belfast 2007

Museo Carrilo Gill, Mexico City 2007

*Sunil Gupta, Retrospective*, Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto & The Photographers' Gallery,

London 2020

Installation Views:



*Figure 16 Homelands installed at London Print Studio, London 2004*



*Figure 17 Homelands installed at the Canadian Museum for Contemporary Photography, Ottawa 2005*



**PICTURES FROM HERE**

Sunil Gupta

**John Hansard Gallery, Southampton**

27 May-26 July

image: from the 'Homelands' series.

In the obscure 1973 French / American film *The Outside Man* Lucien Bellon, a hit-man from Paris, travels to Los Angeles to bump off a successful crime boss. After the job is done Bellon finds that his passport has been stolen and he spends the rest of the film trying to cope with being stranded, an outsider in a foreign country with a limited grasp of the language.

A framed poster for *The Outside Man* turns up in one of the photographs in Sunil Gupta's new exhibition *Pictures From Here*. To the right of the poster Gupta stands naked, on the left of the poster his body and face are reflected in profile in the very edge of a mirror. The inclusion of the poster is apt, as is Gupta's positioning within both the frame of the mirror and the image itself. Throughout the show, the photographer travels from one location to another, yet seems forever on the margins of what he depicts. When he portrays himself he is either alone and inside, or he is a trace in the outside world: a distant reflection in a window, a shadow on the ground.

Yet Gupta is also central to his work. Knowledge of his background is essential to its comprehension. Gupta was born in India and has lived in Canada, New York, and London. A number of 'issues' are dealt with in his work, the booklet accompanying the show describes Gupta as 'a gay man of colour with HIV'. Thankfully these issues have led to work which is visually interesting and not without humour.

The main part of the exhibition *Pictures From Here* consists of a series of diptychs, most of which set up oppositions and make comparisons between India and the West. In one pair of images two pink-skinned body-builders in posing pouches painted on a wall in Rajasthan are positioned alongside a building in Nova Scotia bearing the logo 'Dairy Queen'. Gupta's figure is reflected in its windows, in the middle but half hidden through distortion.

The suggested expression of a repressed undercurrent of homosexuality in India is also addressed in *(A World Without) Pity*, a 32-minute video which forms the other part of the show. Alongside scenes from India (some of which we see frozen in the photographs), various participants are interviewed about the denial of gay identity in India and the resulting difficulties in treating HIV. It is

an insightful and moving piece, but is not necessarily best placed within a gallery space, especially when it ends up providing a soundtrack to other work which requires some contemplation.

Barriers are a recurring motif in the photographs in *Pictures From Here*; our view of the world is often blocked by window frames, fences, and signs shouting 'private property'. However the barriers are within the images in the diptychs, not between them; the two photographs are placed side by side. Links between locations are suggested as our look (and Gupta) travels from one place to another. Of course what really connects the images is Sunil Gupta. The 'here' that these pictures are from is not a geographical location. The images are as much about what is inside the mind of the man who made them as they are about the places he finds himself in.

Stephen Bull

Figure 18 Stephen Bull in Source magazine Autumn 2003



Figure 19 The Pioneer, New Delhi 30 April 2004

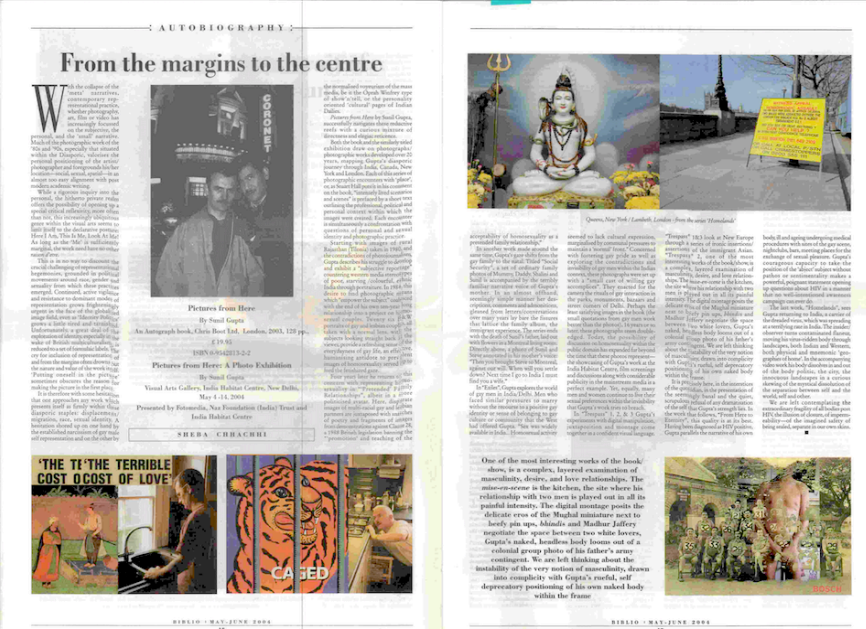


Figure 20 Biblio, Mumbai May-June 2004

## Mr Malhotra's Party

Series Title: *Mr Malhotra's Party*

Image Titles: Individual's names (47 in total)

Medium: Pigment Archival Prints

Dimensions: 22 x 42 inches & 42 x 42 inches

Year of Image: 2005—2012

Year of Prints: 2007—2015

Exhibited

Photo London, London 2007

*Street & Studio*, Tate Modern, London 2008

*Modern India*, Valencian Institute of Modern Art, Valencia 2008

Clifford Chance, London 2008

Vadhera Art Gallery, ARCO, Madrid 2009

*En todas partes (Everywhere)*, Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, Santiago de Compostela, 2009

*Self and the Other*, Espai 2 - Palau de la Virreina, Barcelona 2009

*Mr Malhotra's Party*, Stephen Bulger, Toronto 2009

*Face-Up*, Vadhera Art Gallery, New Delhi 2010

*Sunil Gupta*, Magdalen College, Oxford 2014

*Sunil Gupta: Out and About in New York and New Delhi*, Sepia Eye, New York 2014

*I am a Camera*, Fotofest, Houston 2015

*Fotobiennale Odense*, Denmark 2016

*Sunil Gupta, Retrospective*, Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto & The Photographers' Gallery, London 2020

Installation Views:



Figure 21 Installed at Photo London 2007



Figure 22 Mr Malhotra's Party image as poster for *India Moderna*, Valencian Institute of Modern Art, Valencia 2008

[Print](#)

• Posted: Sat, Jul 18 2009, 12:57 AM IST

## They are just like us

Sunil Gupta's portraits of self-assertion in the face of prejudice hold up a mirror to viewers

Himanshu Bhagat

Young men and women—aged around 30 or under—have posed for a series of portraits taken in public places by the photographer Sunil Gupta. The series—part of the show *Face Up* organised by Tasveer in Bangalore—is titled *Mr Malhotra's Party*, which sounds evocative but odd until Gupta explains why.



Since homosexual acts are illegal in India—the recent Delhi high court ruling against Article 377, which criminalizes homosexual activity, could change this—when the well-off members of Delhi's gay community want to organize a get-together, they often put up a sign outside the venue saying that it is a private party, say, "Mr Singh's party" or "Mr Sharma's party".

Gupta—who is gay, grew up in Delhi and after extended stints overseas now lives here again—attended one such gathering which had been billed as "Mr Malhotra's party". He found it quite apposite. "Malhotra is the typical post-Partition refugee who came from across the border and helped make Delhi what it is today," he says. And hence, a typical Delhi

name for this portrait series of young gay men and women who live in the Capital.

Looking straight into the camera and at the viewer, these confident youngsters are making a statement—"I am gay and I don't have a problem with that"—and, implicitly, asking a question, "Do you?"

Looking straight into the camera and at the viewer, these confident youngsters are making a statement—"I am gay and I don't have a problem with that"—and, implicitly, asking a question, "Do you?"

Figure 23 *Live Mint*, Mumbai, 18 July 2018

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Photographs

## Capturing Gay India

Photographer Sunil Gupta digs deep for personal portraits that expose the 'other' Delhi

Kristen V Brown

Sitting in the living room of photographer Sunil Gupta's South Delhi retreat, there is the undeniable sense that someone (or something) is watching. Soon you realise that you are indeed the focal point of multiple pairs of eyes, peering out intrusively from glossy framed photographs that adorn the dimly lit walls. You squirm awkwardly, but like the stalking gaze of da Vinci's Mona Lisa, the confrontation is unavoidable.

These images embellishing Gupta's white-walled abode are the undeniably assaulting images from his latest exhibited work, *Mr. Malhotra's Party*, named after a Punjabi refugee who contributed heavily to Delhi's development. The images, which immortalise the confrontational stares of Delhi's gay men and women, are the sort of uncomfortable works of creativity usually reserved for modern art galleries – along with nude pictures of the overweight, and other types of images designed more for their conceptual value than the aesthetic. Decidedly not the sort of mild-mannered landscape portraits you'd expect in an otherwise modestly furnished house.

Then again, Gupta's personal living space has evolved into a sort of art gallery-cum-discussion forum. Friends describe it as the kind of place where art lovers, as well as the movers and shakers of certain well-known social movements, are frequently moving in and out. "He doesn't separate himself from what we call issues, but for him it is his

real living space. He takes everything out on the streets; he doesn't have a private," explains Radhika Singh, a long-time friend who has curated many of Gupta's exhibitions through her company Fotomedia – including his first in India in 2004.



And that's because for Gupta, his art is the issue. It would be impossible to separate the man from the art, or the activist from the photographer. When Gupta – now nearing sixty and sporting a silver coiffeur atop his still youthfully lanky frame – first started seriously making photographs, he immediately understood his calling.

"At a very basic level, gay men in India do not have an image. Literally," Gupta explains. "So at a very basic level photography has a

big role to play in providing us with an image of ourselves. And as a maker of photographs I see it as my role to make pictures that people can relate to."

Having immigrated to Canada as a teenager with his family, Gupta was pursuing an MBA in New York when he first decided to take photographs professionally. Later, attending "proper art school" in London, Gupta realised that as a gay Indian, art history was void of anything he could relate to.

"There was a show at the Hayward in London about classical Indian art. It was the days of postmodernism, and everything referenced something, but I couldn't reference anything," he says. "I couldn't relate."

Gupta decided to set out on a mission he defined as "critical": to create an identity, a literal image for the gay Indian.

So 20 some years ago, Gupta revisited the city of his birth to make his first images of what was then Delhi's gay underground. The mood of these photographs differs decisively from the more current images visitors first encounter on Gupta's walls. In these images, collectively entitled *Exiles*, the subjects shy away from the camera lens, turning their backs, hiding their faces.

"At the time, they seemed so vulnerable as a group and didn't have a place in society. As a gay man, I felt I couldn't live in such a repressive atmosphere," he writes on his website. The images were

The Caravan, December 16-31, 2008 59

Figure 24 The Caravan, New Delhi December 16-31, 2008



## The New Pre-Raphaelites

Series Title: *The New Pre-Raphaelites*

Image Titles: Untitled, #1—15

Medium: Pigment Archival Prints

Dimensions: 28 x 42 inches

Year of Image: 2008

Year of Prints: 2009

Commissioned by Autograph—the Association of Black Photographers, London

## Exhibited

*Love, Undetectable*, Vadehra Art Gallery, Delhi 2009

*The New Pre-Raphaelites*, Grosvenor Vadehra, London 2010

*The New Pre-Raphaelites*, Aberdeen Art Gallery, Aberdeen 2010

*The Matter Within New Contemporary Art of India*, Yerba Buena, San Francisco 2011

*Queer Migrations*, Whitney Humanities Centre, Yale University 2015

*Sunil Gupta: In Pursuit of Love*, Pelz Gallery, Birkbeck, University of London 2017

*The Politics of the Image*, Brixton Tate Library 2019

*Hyphen*, Ambika P3, University of Westminster 2019

*Sunil Gupta, Retrospective*, Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto & The Photographers' Gallery, London 2020

Installation Views:



Figure 25 at the Aberdeen Art Gallery 2010



Figure 26 wall label linking image to art historical reference at the Aberdeen Art Gallery 2010



Figure 27 installation at Brixton Tate Library 2019

Reviews

# Sunil Gupta

## New Pre-Raphaelites

**THE ARTIST**  
Sunil Gupta is a photographer, writer and curator living and working in London and Delhi. He was involved in the Black Photographers' Project, the Visual Arts (VADA) project and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) project. He has exhibited his work in various international galleries and museums.

**THE WRITER**  
Radhika Singh is a writer and curator living and working in London and Delhi. She has written for various international publications and has curated several exhibitions and projects.

Sunil Gupta's series of ten images entitled 'The New Pre-Raphaelites' has been produced in response to a report by the Human Rights Commission on sexual violence in India. He is not there in the middle of the debate on section 377, speaking openly about his sexuality and empowering others to do the same. This domestic moment had to find powerful representation. Sunil turned to the Pre-Raphaelites for inspiration where commissioned to make a series of images on a current contentious issue of human rights.

CONSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGE AT THE DELHI HIGH COURT SECTION 377 OF THE INDIA PENAL CODE IS AN ANCHOR LINE instituted by the British in 1862 that criminalizes homosexuality. Also referred to as the Anti-Sodomy Law, section 377 has consistently led to the arbitrary arrest and exploitation of large numbers of Indians, mostly gay, bisexual and transgender. Inevitably, this has led to a closet culture where alternative sexuality has been pushed underground, making it very difficult to research and treat serious medical problems such as STDs and HIV/AIDS. The movement to repeal section 377 has been led by the Naz Foundation India Trust, an activist group concerned with ensuring constitutional rights to this invisible group.

Sunil Gupta's photographic work over the last thirty years is an ongoing engagement with a global debate with issues of gender, sexuality and human rights. He has faced setbacks to confront the closeted, hidden, and unspoken structures within society. He has photographed what he knows best, from the gay, and both his books are a testimony to that faith, the transparent interplay of private and public.

Sunil has been in the forefront of the gay rights movement in India since his return. Within the last four years his activism has been the most compelling force in the media and the arts space in India. He is not there in the middle of the debate on section 377, speaking openly about his sexuality and empowering others to do the same. This domestic moment had to find powerful representation. Sunil turned to the Pre-Raphaelites for inspiration where commissioned to make a series of images on a current contentious issue of human rights.

The Pre-Raphaelites stood for a reformation of art, for attention to new photographic, detail and colour, the brilliance of which was meant to wipe out the darkness that characterized the hypocrisy of the classical Victorian pose. The Brotherhood spoke out against the bourgeois pomp of the eighteenth century, and meant to bring the arts back to sharply focused observations of the truths of nature.

Sunil Gupta's series of ten images deals with the reality of poisoning gay couples, single men and women, and families posing romantically at the cutting edge of desire and passion. An unlikely combination of symbolism and realism, the photographs are filled with the intense luminosity of mythology while concentrating on models (real people) who occupy the spaces of crucial desire within the lines of section 377. Exotic, colorful backdrops highlight brilliant costumes, and sometimes male bodies with a precise devotion to detail that is magnetic. By his own admission, Sunil works with the entire gender canvas to include those other protagonists of this struggle.

The women portrayed in this series are living in the shadows of gay movement, free of the criminality of sodomy, but haunted down society and even hated also by their families who would rather kill them than face reality.

The implicit ideal of romanticism, of freedom being important from responsibility, has always run a slender thread through Sunil's work. This time it has woven itself a tapestry of storytelling, compelling as Tennessee's poem 'The Lady of Shalott'. Each new Pre-Raphaelite image refers specifically to an original painting by one of the masters, for example John Everett Millais's 'The Woodman's Rest'. Marjorie are clearly visible in two of Gupta's portraits.

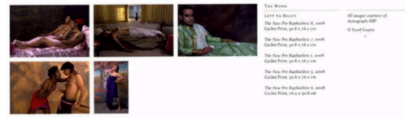


Figure 28 Radhika Singh in Next Level 2009

# BOYS DON'T SHY, AND SAME GOES WITH GIRLS

...WHO'RE IN LOVE WITH THOSE OF THEIR OWN KIND. WORLD-RENOWNED LENSMAN OF INDIAN ORIGIN, SUNIL GUPTA, EXPLORES GAY LOVE IN ALL ITS PIETY AND PATHOS IN HIS ONGOING EXHIBITION TITLED LOVE, UNDETECTABLE



**KUMAR SAURAV**  
kumar.saurav@ndtv.com

Gay love, argue those from the community, is most often misunderstood as a trivial, unmanly sexual indulgence. Here comes an attempt to dispel the delusion. Internationally acclaimed gay photo-artist from Delhi, Sunil Gupta, who's suffered much due to societal homophobia, has put up a show that he hopes will change perspectives and help the world understand same-sex bonding better. We talked it over.

**Why Love, Undetectable?**  
Because love, which is absolute emotion, can't be measured. You can never quantify the excitement of meeting a new person, the joy of sharing space, the pain if you part ways and the hatred that might come with the separation. On the other hand, there're clinical repercussions of love, too — AIDS, which can be detected, measured and monitored. It's this intersection that my exhibition takes you to.

**I tested (HIV) positive in 1995. I have lived in isolation for more than a decade; the feeling kills**

SUNIL GUPTA, PHOTO

**What are the main media used?**  
There're four — photographs, installations, sets and three videos.

**Are the characters in your compositions real?**  
Yes. They are people from the community, not models. I know most of them either directly, or through friends.

**Were they hesitant?**  
Many were; many weren't. But it's only natural to be apprehensive while making oneself the subject of public exhibition. Many people from the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual) community distance themselves from open appearances in public domain because they fear the moral policing, legal implications and embarrassment.

**So, how did you manage to convince them?**  
I explained them the aesthetics and philosophy of the shoot, and they said, why not.

**Do you think the amendment**

**in Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code will help start a new cultural wave?**

Yes. In times to come, you will see a lot of creative cultural productions like books, paintings, photographs and theatre that's by and for the differently inclined. The change will propel positive discussion.

**Are there shades from your own personal life and suffering, too?**  
Art in any form is an artist's perception of situations that he has gone through, the way he dealt with them and lessons he's learnt.

**What are these lessons?**  
I tested (HIV) positive in 1995. My partner and I had to break up to fight the scare stemming from this. Things aren't the same, no matter how hard you try. People around you either start bugging you with their prejudice, or start caring for you so much that you start feeling self-pity. I have lived in isolation for more than a decade; it's just been me. The feeling kills.

**Do such opinions subside with time, as people start to forget?**

They don't. First, when the doctor informs you that you're positive, you can't accept it yourself, leave aside family, friends and relatives. The initial sympathy gets transformed into anger and then into suspicion. Everyone looks at you suspiciously, and thinks you must've done something wrong to be where you are. You're left to suffer in solitude.

**How did you cope with the pain?**  
I went in for therapies and professional help.

**Have you found love again?**  
Yes, someone is waiting for me across the road. Someone who loves me for what I am, and not what he or she wants me to be.

**LOVE, UNDETECTABLE**  
ON TILL: September 25  
WHERE: Vadehra art gallery D-07B, Dada Phase I  
TIMINGS: 11 am to 7 pm  
RING: 65474005, 65474006

Figure 29 The Guide, New Delhi 2009

Sun City

Series Title: *Sun City*

Image Titles: Untitled, #1—17

Medium: Pigment Archival Prints

Dimensions: 28 x 42 inches

Year of Image: 2010

Year of Prints: 2011

Sun City, Commissioned by the Centre Pompidou, Paris

Financial assistance principally by the Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi; with further assistance by Stephen Bulger Gallery, Toronto; Sepia Eye, New York; Mr Rudolph Leuthold, London

Paris Production:

Eva Albarran & Co

Production Manager and general coordination: Marguerite Vial

Production assistant: Kasia Konieczna

Lighting technician: Simon Roche

Lighting technician: Baptiste Dhont-Farcy

Assistant Photographer: Saadiya Kochar

Actors:

Kamal Kant, Claude Jan

Ensemble:

Mehboob Dada, Ghaly Bensouda, Ronny Pong, Emmanuel Potier, Christophe Leprêtre,

Bruno Tacnet, Raycharles Sambe, Cedric Gambon

Thanks to Centre Pompidou, Gym Sebastopol Sun City, Paris Aéroport de Paris-Orly, Senat-Jardin du Luxembourg, Printemps Haussman (Paris)

With additional thanks to Argos Films, Paris for the use of "La Jetée"

Exhibited

*Paris, Delhi, Bombay...*, Centre Pompidou, Paris 2011

*The Matter Within New Contemporary Art of India*, Yerba Buena, San Francisco 2011

*Love AIDS Riot Sex-2*, neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst (nGbK), Berlin 2014

*Moving Still: Performative Photography from India*, Vancouver Art Gallery 2019

*Sunil Gupta, Retrospective*, Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto & The Photographers' Gallery,

London 2020



Figure 30 Gallery Romaine, Alliance Française, New Delhi 2012

Installation Views:

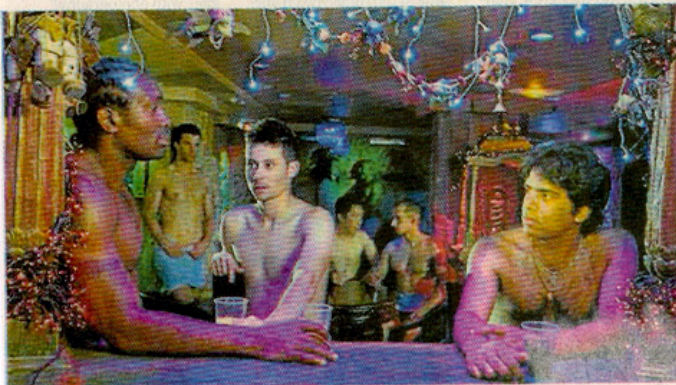


Figure 31 With my assistant, lead actors and production team including the museum staff, Pompidou Centre July 2010



Figure 32 Installation at Gallery Romaine, Alliance Française, New Delhi March 2012

**CELEBRATING FRENCH**



**ARTISTIC** A photograph from the exhibition 'Sun City & Other Stories'.

# French world comes to Delhi

**H**alf a billion Francophones around the world will celebrate International Day of Francophonie today and for those who are in Delhi, can head to Alliance Francaise which is organising 'Francophonie Week 2012'. The festival which begins Tuesday, will go on till 25 March to celebrate the journey of French language with a series of exhibitions, musical performances, art and cinema.

The International Francophonie Day is traditionally celebrated on 20 March, the day in 1970 when the treaty was signed in Niamey for the creation of the Agency for Cultural and Technological Cooperation, which is now known as the Francophone Agency. The term 'francophonie' was coined by French essayist Onésime Reclus in around 1880, to describe the geographic areas in which French was spoken. A lot has happened since then, and today francophonie refers to the ensemble of people around the

world who speak French.

Today, French is the official language of 33 countries and second most commonly studied foreign language in the world. So it is a chance for Delhiites to celebrate the coming together of various nations with different cultural values, to mark their oneness through a common language – French.

Talking about the Francophonie Community, Jean Philippe Bottin, director of Alliance Francaise de Delhi says, "The Francophonie Community encompasses today 63 states and governments which have chosen to be a part of this group. Every year, this reunion of diverse cultures is celebrated through a Festival of arts and cultures."

The highlight this year is the Mela on March 24, which will bring representatives from different countries to put up stalls, share cultures and food from their lands. For those who are enthusiastic, there are prizes to be won in a music competition.

On the day of the Mela, there will be a unique introduction to the universe of Francophonie, through a wide range of events, including a theatrical performance titled 'The School of Fools' by students of JNU and children from an NGO TARA. A grand performance by Canadian duo 'Tango Boreal' will conclude this day of festivities.

The celebrations will begin in Alliance Francaise with a photographic exhibition titled 'I am my parents' eyes 2008' by Douglas Vanherpe, who lived in different countries and started taking pictures to share his life with his parents. Vanherpe says: "What started as something random became an obsession and my camera is almost a part of me. I left my country 17 years ago. I shot this series in 2008. They are a very small selection of the pictures I have sent to my parents that year." So don't miss all these occasions to discover the world of Francophonie.

**DHNS**

Figure 33 Deccan Herald, New Delhi 20 March 2012



# Exploring the other side of romance

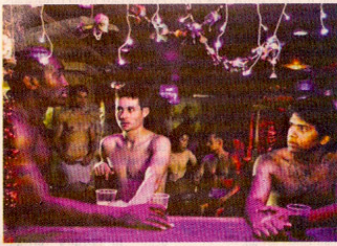
Madhur Tankha

**NEW DELHI:** Delhi-based photographer Sunil Gupta has explored the controversial subject of homosexuality in his upcoming exhibition which opens at Galerie Romain Rolland in Alliance Francaise de Delhi here this coming Saturday.

Titled "Sun City and Other Stories: Paris-San Francisco-Delhi", the 24-day-long photo exhibition displaying 16 colour pictures were captured by Sunil during his stay in France two years ago.

The seeds of the exhibition were sown when Sunil received an invitation for a month-long residency to the Georges Pompidou Centre, a museum of contemporary art in Paris, in 2010.

Sunil took the invitation as an opportunity to explore his creative side. Since the re-



**A UNIQUE NARRATIVE:** An exhibition of photos on the subject of homosexuality opens at Alliance Francaise de Delhi this weekend.

quirement was to portray something that connected with the life in Paris, Sunil chose to approach the subject of homosexuality.

For his project, Sunil chose an Indian protagonist who arrived in Paris one fine day and was taken aback by the open gay society. "I chose all

professional models including the Indian for this exhibition," he says.

To make his project interesting, Sunil decided to weave a fictional narrative loosely based on the French science fiction *La Jetée*. Chris Marker's film was constructed as a photo-story or slideshow narrated by a commentator and recounting one of the narrator's childhood memories.

In Sun City, the nuclear apocalypse of the 1962 film has been replaced by threat posed by the rise in the number of HIV/AIDS cases. The heterosexual possibility of romantic love, which drives the original character, has now been replaced by the story of an immigrant from India and his love story with an older Frenchman.

"In the main part of the exhibited pictures, the hero

alternates between living out a romantic relationship in the open and another life where he discovers the gay bath house and slowly progresses towards increasing degrees of intimacy with a series of anonymous partners. In both worlds, he is new and uncertain. In India, where he comes from, neither situation is possible. Therefore, both the situations are novel to him," says Sunil.

This exhibition was applauded in Paris and will now be mounted for the first time in the country.

Sunil feels the subject he chose is a contemporary one because the Delhi High Court has de-criminalised intercourse between consenting adults. "Homosexuality was a taboo subject in our country. However, now we are witnessing more debates and discussions on this subject."

Figure 35 The Hindu, New Delhi 20 March 2012

**Gay & Lesbian**

Three guests from Sunil Gupta's Sun City series

**Photo play**

Sunil Gupta takes up questions of love, lust and identity in his new show, says **Sonam Joshi**

Paris to live with his French lover. Gupta recounted how he met the man who inspired the series on an Internet date. "He had come from here to live with somebody in a suburb outside Paris. He couldn't speak French. This guy didn't know what to do so, in the middle of the day he had these dates." La Jette, an alternative between visitors of a present, in which humans have retreated underground, and the open spaces of the past. In Gupta's photos, these contrasting backgrounds become the sites at which two different extremes of the central character's present life play out: a stable relationship above ground, and promiscuity in underground gay bathhouse that he frequents. The title refers to an actual gay bathhouse in Paris, where Gupta did many of the interior photographs in 2010. "I began to see the individual faces of Sun City as film stills, like in the days when you had them in the foyer of a cinema," he said. Like these stills, the photos will be displayed in sequence, but without captions.

Several of the finely detailed scenes in Sun City borrow their poses from images by photographers such as Baron von Gleichen and George Platt Lynes. Gupta

**Racism like homophobia works by invisibility**

According to Gupta, showing the same work in different contexts can be difficult. "When I made the pictures, I was conscious of showing them in India," he said. "I had to be discreet, but not to the point of being shy. But to bring in the West they see more and more of everything, so the pressure is to show more and more." In light of these complexities, Gupta's interpretation of a 50-year-old French photo film not only a successful piece of cross-cultural exchange, but also a compelling contribution to the history of homosexuality.

**Sun City and Other Stories** is on from Sat Mar 24 at Alliance Francaise, see Listings.

March 16 - 29 2012 [www.timesofindia.com](http://www.timesofindia.com) B3

Figure 36 Time Out, New Delhi March 16-29, 2012

THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI  
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 4, 2012

**TIMES**

## Another false start for axed photo show

We Have No Objections: Cops

Shreya Roy Chowdhury

New Delhi: It is curtains for Sunil Gupta's photo exhibition at Alliance Francaise once again. There's been much flip-flopping about the show which was originally meant to be up from March 23. It was closed a day after opening, following complaints against nudes in a few exhibits. However, the French cultural institute had informed The Times of India on Monday that they were going to open it

was also getting charged and I'm not in a position to face those. Last week, it seemed like the institute was saying no but it seems there is some existing external threat to both parties," says Gupta. "There was pressure and I agreed to comply." After the show was closed on Saturday members of the the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT) had expressed displeasure and photographer Ram Rahman has spoken to Alliance as well. "But now Alliance is freaked out and there's no question of the show happening. The whole thing is totally bizarre," says Rahman. Alliance continues to remain silent on the matter.

Curious cops insist they have nothing against the photos. "The police have no objections to the exhibition. If we receive any complaints, we will take proper action. Earlier they have organized events without informing us. They have been advised to give us information in advance so that appropriate security arrangements may be made," says R C Devidi, addl. CE New Delhi district.

Gupta is obviously less certain about the police's stand on the matter and has sought legal advice though he says he has neither the stamina nor the resources for a court case. "I could have not shown the offending photos, but that wouldn't have felt right. There was no frontal nudity and there were advisories — signs and warnings — the first time the pictures went up and this time as well."



Photographer Sunil Gupta

from April 4 this time, with extra security. But apparently, that plan had to be dropped. Police, on the other hand, maintained they have no objections to the exhibition.

Gupta had gone to the gallery on Tuesday to hang his works — three series including "Sun City" which had the controversial photos shot in a bathhouse — but learnt that there were threats and "ever increasing noise about charges."

Alliance is not opening the show on Wednesday after all and it is a decision Gupta supports. "I have had no direct interaction with the police but I

Gupta is obviously less certain about the police's stand on the matter and has sought legal advice though he says he has neither the stamina nor the resources for a court case. "I could have not shown the offending photos, but that wouldn't have felt right. There was no frontal nudity and there were advisories — signs and warnings — the first time the pictures went up and this time as well."

Figure 34 The Times of India, New Delhi April 4, 2012

Sunil Gupta

List of Art Works

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