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## **VIVAN SUNDARAM IS NOT A PHOTOGRAPHER: THE PHOTOGRAPHIC WORK OF VIVAN SUNDARAM**

### **Introduction: Moving Away from the Proposition**

I think that in some way my wish is to move from the position or the intention of what I start with, to something organically and spontaneously reached that moves away from that proposition... I am interested in taking that risk.

Vivan Sundaram, in conversation, November 2016.

This is a book about the photographic work of Vivan Sundaram.

Vivan Sundaram is not a photographer.

What could be meant by such an assertion? Much has been written about the definition of photography and its history, now that digital image production and manipulation have radically displaced older practices – and theories – of photography and re-shaped their parameters.<sup>1</sup> Both constructed and staged photography stand alongside photographic practices that are essentially documentary: reliant on the capture of what Henri Cartier-Bresson famously called “the decisive moment.”<sup>2</sup> Around the globe, in cities and countryside alike and on screens large and small, human subjects are being deluged with photographic imagery. With such ubiquity, the nature of the photograph – and of the photographic image (for the two are not necessarily coterminous) – has undergone radical redefinition. Not least, the advent of the digital era, and the proliferation of online photo-sharing platforms it has spawned, has disgorged an unprecedented volume of photographs into public circulation. Here, the distinctions between

amateur, vernacular, documentary and art photography are often blurred. Arguably, this blurring itself is not new. Rather, it underlines the fact that “photography” was always ever thus: an umbrella term for multiple and varied practices.

The nature of any particular practice of photography depends on the institutions and agents that enlist it, and that it, in turn, enlists for its mobilisation. Each practice has its distinct aims, constituencies, audiences, circuits of dissemination and display, and forms of archiving and storage. What they have in common is an origin, a history based on the idea of capturing an ephemeral likeness in light, and fixing. This idea entailed the marriage of science and art, and the technologies it harnessed boosted mimetic representation.<sup>3</sup> The more specific common denominator of different analogue photographic practices and their theorisation (whose most iconic expression remains Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, published in 1980) is the immobilisation of a moment, where the rapid descent of the shutter determines the “capture.” In being thus caught, the object that flits before the lens for a split second is not only perpetuated, it is also – paradoxically – put to death. Its essence, as something contingent upon time and motion, is extirpated. In short, the click that eternalises the gesture also mortifies and embalms the body: the promise of an afterlife comes at a cost. “To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt,” writes Susan Sontag (Sontag, 1977: 15). Barthes hyperbolised this concept in his elaboration of the notion that death is intrinsic to the very idea of photography: for him, the photographic capture of any living being also announces that being’s death in the future. Sontag’s metaphor is one of deliquescence, implying heat and motility in the lived moment; the “slicing” performed by the camera action is the operation of a cold, sharp implement. In short, like Barthes, Sontag defines a paradigm of photography invested in the idea of the image as the indexical trace of a moment now lost

Although this will be familiar to many readers, it is worth mentioning that the term “indexicality,” coined by American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, is commonly used to characterise the status of analogue photography. Indexicality describes a sign whose link to its referent is not symbolic (as language is symbolic), but is; rather, embedded in the Real as a

trace of something that once happened. Just as a footprint is an indexical sign of a (past) presence, so an analogue photograph is the luminous trace of something that was in front of the camera at the moment that the photograph was “taken.” As a photochemical trace of something that actually existed, the photograph is thus understood to attest to the reality of its referent. Like a footprint or a plaster cast, photography thus considered – as an unmediated mechanical inscription – links the artefact (“photograph”) to the indisputable fact of its subject’s existence in a specific space and at a particular time, now past. Documentary, then, is the default mode of such photography: historically, in the popular imagination and in photographic theory alike, photography was considered to provide a phenomenological account of the world.<sup>4</sup>

Digital image capture, while simulating photography in some respects, offers a range of technical capabilities that alters this particular relationship of the artefact with the indexical trace and the evidentiary link forged with time past, ushering what Laura Mulvey has called “a crisis of the photographic sign as index” (Mulvey, 2006: 18). In other words, digitisation has changed the very ontological status of the photograph. As continuous tone imprint gives way to binary codes, the substitution of smooth grain by pixel mosaic is symptomatic of the fact that, strictly speaking, digital images are in no way photographic, since the coded signifiers are abstract data that can easily be played with as abstractions, with no connection to the Real. As W. J. Mitchell puts it, “since captured, ‘painted’ and synthesized pixel values can be combined seamlessly, the digital image blurs the customary distinctions between painting and photography and between mechanical and handmade pictures” (Mitchell, [1992] 2001: 7). Moreover, in the digital darkroom – the space and procedure of postproduction that often goes by the brand name of its most popular product – inventiveness pits itself against indexicality. While the idea that photography was indexical served as a guarantor of the truth effect that distinguished photography from other forms of representation, digital elaboration – whether as tonal and chromatic distortion, filters, painterliness, collage, montage, abstraction, surrealism or any other conceivable idiom – presses upon the viewer the constructed nature of the image.

However, as I underline in Chapter 1, important cultural continuities bind the new digital images to old analogue photographs and the habits of viewing they fostered, prompting certain expectations on the part of viewers, not least, the prevailing faith in the validating truth effect of photographic work, its privileged relationship with the Real. This persists, for instance, in the ways in which photographic images are used on social media as proof. Indeed, perhaps one of the most recurrent motifs in all photographic theory concerns the way photography was historically a technology pressed in the service of empirical truth. Nevertheless, the artefact that enables the “pencil of nature”—as photographic pioneer Henry Fox Talbot famously called photography—to manifest itself, has always also been open not only to retouching, but also to staging. It is this representational nature of photography that digital imaging and contemporary staged photography underline. Despite the fact that, more than their analogue counterparts, digital images can readily be altered or even radically “doctored,”<sup>5</sup> the notion that a photograph stands as a shrine to time past continues, in certain quarters, to be pervasive.

But simultaneous to the uses of photography that extend those of analogue production (“analogue” is a descriptor fashioned retrospectively in relation to digital imaging), there are entirely new uses of the image, which—essentially immaterial—can now be bonded onto any conceivable support. This suggests, as Fred Ritchin argues, that “for those who think of digital media as simply providing more efficient tools, what we are witnessing today is an evolution in media.” Ritchin submits that photography of the digital kind—“wired, instantaneous, automatic, malleable, a component of a larger multimedia” may turn out to “have a more distant relationship with the film-and-chemicals variety that came before it” (Ritchin, 2008: 19) than those earlier photographic mediums had with the painting medium that preceded them and inspired the invention of photography in the nineteenth century.

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Vivan Sundaram has always been “a restless artist” (Tripathi, 2016), never allowing formal and thematic explorations to settle into the conformities of medium or style, and, as we shall see, as keenly alert to the histories of art as to the bigger historical picture(s). Belonging to a

generation of figurative artists that emerged from the Baroda School in the early 1960s, he was caught up in the group's exploration of modernism with a local flavour, incorporating mythologies of Indian folklore, as well as probing contemporary social issues. "Like other contemporary artists who live and create on the fringes of the Western art markets," Andreas Huyssen observes, "Sundaram works out of the ruins of European modernism, creating a distinctive idiom, steeped in the metropolitan Indian environment" (Huyssen, 2015a: 65). The notion of working belatedly with European idioms, and – contrariwise – the effects of the globalisation of art markets and, concomitantly, art idioms since the 1990s, is touched upon in Chapter 3 below, as is the importance of the metropolis and its underbelly and detritus.

Under the tidal wave of Pop Art, Sundaram quickly absorbed collage and the found object into his practice, even prior to his sojourn in London in the mid 1960s, where – in the hands of artists such as Ronald Kitaj and Eduardo Paolozzi – the principles of collage and assemblage, with their reliance on found objects, became a *modus operandi*. In London, with the aid of a Commonwealth Scholarship, Sundaram attended the Slade School of Art. In the third year of his scholarship, he joined the film department, nurturing his growing interest in the complex narrative, compositional and aesthetic possibilities offered by montage and "the cut." These practices have consistently informed his work since it changed direction in the 1990s, at which point, as Chaitanya Sambrani points out, generationally, Sundaram became a misfit. The "artist-colleagues and comrades" with whom his multimedia work has affinities, are all at least a decade younger than he is,<sup>6</sup> whereas his chronological peer group has remained primarily "committed to the drawn and painted image" (Sambrani, 2008: 5).

It was in the context of his fascination with the found object and then the readymade, and the intersecting procedures of collage/assemblage/montage, that Sundaram incorporated photography into his practice. While analogue photographs served as source material for his paintings for two decades, it was only in the 1990s that he began using photography as a more active agent in his work, a change that coincided with his abandonment of painting as a practice and his engagement with installation. As a form of production in a multimedia "expanded field," Sundaram first essayed installation in *Memorial* (1993/2014). a complex, multi-part work for which the point of departure was a single photograph. Here, installation

pressed itself upon him when he confronted the vast task of memorialisation that he had set himself (see Ananth, 2018: 19). The principle of collage is sustained in Sundaram's installations as that of active, additive, responsive procedures. In the paintings, collage had been a veiled but always present principle governing the way images plucked from different sources were seamed together on two-dimensional surfaces, resulting in a pictorial space congruent with multiple viewing positions. If "collage" implies a two-dimensional surface and "assemblage" is its three-dimensional equivalent, with the cessation of painting, the principle of assemblage becomes predominant, but now also overwritten by a process characterised as bricolage.

The terms *assemblage* and *bricolage* both describe working procedures that entail addition and accumulation rather than synthesis. The differences between these terms appear minute, yet relevant. On first consideration, it would seem that bricolage entails not only a way of making something, but also a way of thinking: a desire for heterogeneity and an accommodation to contingency and circumstance. It might be useful, here, to adopt the lens of Anna Deuze, who sees assemblage as a "model of engagement with the world rather than a formal style," and bricolage as determining an attitude of improvisatory problem solving within the material world (Deuze, 2008:31). This is particularly pertinent in the light of Claude Lévi-Strauss's description of bricolage as "the science of the concrete." Lévi-Strauss's now famous formulation entails material contiguity and lateral thinking. Unlike the engineer or craftsman, the *bricoleur* uses "devious means" and a "heterogeneous repertoire" of materials that brings about unforeseen results. The *bricoleur* is, for Lévi-Strauss, someone who speaks with and through things; someone who does not carry out his tasks using raw materials or purpose-made tools, but rather, puts things together by appropriating "whatever is at hand" (Lévi-Strauss, [1962] 1966: 17-18). The act of making thus becomes a form of making do, a process that is dynamic and unpredictable, fostering new forms of knowledge. Bricolage, in other words, is a process that not only enables, but also encourages what Sundaram calls "moving away from the proposition."

Anna Deuze explores assemblage through a reconsideration of curator William Seitz's exhibition *Art of Assemblage* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1961. She points out that academic discussions concerning the definition of assemblage at that time generally

revolved around the extent of transformation undergone by the constituent parts of a composition, the found bits of waste that together composed a work. Put succinctly, the consensus seems to have been that for a work to qualify as an assemblage, its constituent parts had to be visually accessible –distinctly visible – rather than absorbed seamlessly into the work. Some time later, the term *bricolage* gained ascendancy over *assemblage*, especially after 1980, when Michel de Certeau used its verbal form, *bricoler*, to describe activities (best translated as *tinkering* in English) that play an essential role in everyday life (de Certeau, 1984).

Characterised as a process-based activity in which the materials employed had previously been “discarded or purloined,” rather than being new or gathered specifically for that purpose, the concept of bricolage has served as a hinge between the works of Cubist- or Dada-inspired artists employing collage and assemblage, and the more contemporary engagement with the materials and actions of everyday life that Nicolas Bourriaud described as “relational aesthetics” in the 1990s, and that other writers (Guy Brett, Claire Bishop, Peggy Phelan, Jo Applin and Anna Dezeuze among others) have further explored. These latter writers have focussed on performativity, interactivity and participatory practices. Several writers (Dezeuze, 2008; Applin, 2008; Hamilton, 2008) have fascinatingly teased out the two terms in relation to attitudes to work and leisure, as well as in terms of a relationship with production, consumption and alienation. However, for the purposes of this study, I would suggest that assemblage be considered as a particular principle of making that is additive and transformational, and that bricolage be regarded as its conceptual and practical vehicle: the active engagement with things through which assemblage is realised. Articulating relations between art and the everyday, assemblage and bricolage converge in their shared endorsement of recycling and in their association with the detritus of urban life at a time of accelerated consumption under late capitalism.

Sundaram’s work is characterised from the outset by agile curiosity and social engagement. From the 1990s, he marshals a panoply of materials and technologies to serve it, proceeding through invention and recycling, yoking happenstance and contingency to intention. This method of working has also meant that his own works enter the vast storehouse of objects available for further use, appropriation and recycling. This accounts for the ways in which

projects feed into one another and enjoy various iterations, sometimes over long periods of time. Through this process, since the 1990s, Sundaram's practice has become paradigmatic of a mode of work that might be defined on one level as curatorial, where the location of production and that of public display converge. By definition, such flexibility implies an eschewal of the categorical determinations of period, style, medium, process and content: the exhibition itself becomes the medium. It is as though, in abandoning the practice of painting, Sundaram also gave up the very notions of periodicity and medium specificity in favour of a more expansive exploration of intermediality as the condition under which the aesthetic might truly and repeatedly flourish.

More specifically, however, Sundaram has applied the instinct of a bricoleur to the desired status of both archivist<sup>7</sup> and installation artist,<sup>8</sup> with all their areas of overlap, at a time when what has been turned an "archival impulse" (Foster, 2004) or "archive fever" (Derrida, [1995] 1996; Enwezor, 2009) have become significant modes of artistic research and methodology in the West; Sundaram was among the first (if not *the* first) to essay this kind of exploration in India. This entails a literal immersion in, and appropriation of, public and private archives (think, for example, of Christian Boltanski's *Archive Dead Swiss*, Fiona Tan's *Facing Forward* (1998-9), Santu Mofokeng's *The Black Photo Album/ Look at Me* (1991-2000) or Hans-Peter Feldman's *9/12 Front Page* (2001)). But it also occasions a broader examination of the very condition of the archive and its relation to its exclusions: the archive as a system enabled by the nature of discursive practice (Foucault [1969] 2002), and subject to the relation of that discourse to power.

In Sundaram's practice, works – or bodies of work – emerge in response to a stimulus, and in his search for the idiom best suited to address that particular concern and widen its scope, he is not inhibited by technical or material constraints: "can do, will do" seems to be his predominant attitude. With such voluntarism, he remains less concerned with leaving his own manual imprint on the works, than in stage-managing their coming-into-being. Yet simultaneously, while summoning teams of collaborators, helpers, makers and technicians, he engages in hands-on practice to bring together the diverse activities and objects that coalesce in complex works: *History Project* (1998), *Gagawaka* (2001) + *Postmortem* (2014) and *Trash*



(2008) are all huge, multi-layered projects, entailing the disposition of spaces, materials and technologies in intricate arrangements, with a vast spatial and temporal spread.

Sundaram consistently and passionately engages with the historical and political particularities of his own position as a subject, both in India, and in the world at large. Simultaneously, he never loses the thread of an enduring conversation with the histories of art, and with the varieties of aesthetic experience among the citizenry of the “art world.”<sup>9</sup> Immersing himself in diverse theoretical discourses and exhibiting strategies that circulate in the art world at any one time, Sundaram also attests to a material and intertextual engagement with particular works within the Western art historical canon, while bringing to bear upon it a rich and diverse materiality that seems irreducibly “Indian.” Writing shortly prior to Sundaram’s abandonment of painting and his move to installation art, critic Thomas McEvilley makes a convincing case for the interweaving of Indian and Western influences in the work of Indian artists during the second half of the twentieth century. This perfectly describes Sundaram’s work too (McEvilley, 1986/1992). While Susan Vogel neatly coined the phrase “digesting the West,” (Vogel, 1991: 14), McEvilley was early in calling for a diffusionist model that opposes a hierarchical reading of how images transition between different cultural contexts.

A confluence of Indian and Western traditions had emerged in Sundaram’s early work as the product of profound erudition and the absorption of different artistic traditions. The oil painting *Thinking About Themselves* (1980/81) is an interesting case in point. It is a loosely naturalistic portrait of three women in a domestic setting, all gazing at the viewer as though posing for a snapshot, while a sharply silhouetted black cat playfully and precisely quotes the black cat in Ronald Kitaj’s pastel, charcoal and oil drawing, *The Rise of Fascism* (1975-9). Describing his painting, Sundaram writes: “they are friends. I got them to pose as in the painting and then photographed them” (email communication, 26 May, 2017). One is dressed in a sari, the other is in Punjabi garb, while the third is attired in Western clothes. This emerges as a kind of manifesto piece, proposing the peaceful cohabitation of different cultural traditions, identifications and affiliations. Such a reading appears to be confirmed by the

quotation from the work of Kitaj, for it is, surely, under “the rise of fascism” that such difference is not tolerated, and yet must be reasserted in order to be heard.<sup>10</sup>

In the later installation works, quotation also abounds. Through such intertextuality, the artist invites viewers to consider his work as part of a lineage and/or fraternity of artists. So it is that *12 Bed Ward* (2005) might suggest similar works by Mona Hatoum; or that *Fly* (one of the digital prints in *Trash*) might invoke Yves Klein’s *Leap into the Void* (1960). And as we shall see, both *Memorial* (1993/2014) and *Great Indian Bazaar* (1997) contain allusions to twentieth-century styles or trends, such as Minimalism or Arte Povera. It is because of Sundaram’s profound immersion in the discourses that weave across the histories of art that I have chosen, in this book, to acknowledge, where possible (and occasionally in footnotes) such convergences and overlaps. They point to the fact that art does not happen in a vacuum, and that claims of originality are the residual traces and symptoms of the modernist prioritisation of the singular author and the novelty of his/her work.

Of course to say that Sundaram engages with an art-historical canon is to step into a minefield, since the very notion of “the” canon is politically and ideologically charged, freighted with exclusions and invisibilities. The extent to which canonicity in Western art rests upon claims of universalism, while masking the fact that the art world itself operates along tribalist lines (and thereby lays itself open to anthropological analysis), became a hot topic of debate – and underpinned curatorial ideas – in the late 1980s and through the 1990s, as seen in the many exhibitions and biennales during that time, conceived by curators such as Jean-Hubert Martin, Okwui Enwezor, Susan Vogel, Olu Oguibe, Geeta Kapur, Gerardo Mosquera, Ivo Mesquita, Apinan Poshyananda, Hou Hanru, Dan Cameron and Catherine David, among others. Indeed, by the 1990s, artists as well as art critics and historians were problematising the notion of the avant-garde, not only, as had occurred a decade earlier, in terms revolving around the binary distinction between modernism and post-modernism, but also in relation to “non-Western” idioms and practices. Such practices had been historically marginalised when monolithic modernism and a canonical vanguard established the predominant art historical model. Writing in the 1990s, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam speak of probing the “conventional sequencing of realism/modernism/post-modernism by looking at some of the alternative

aesthetics offered by Third World, postcolonial, and minoritarian cultural practices: practices that dialogue with Western art movements” (Shohat and Stam, 1998: 31). Concomitantly, biennale culture – from the Asian Art Biennale in Bangladesh, through Havana, Istanbul and Dakar, to Johannesburg and Gwangju – reinforced the growing tide of multiculturalism, with its eschewal of a uniform canon of style and taste.

This was coincident with the flowering of the concept of hybridity in the humanities, brought into the mainstream by writers like Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha and James Clifford. The concept of hybridity, though initially born of discourses of colonisation, emerged alongside struggles for cultural sovereignty and came to embody anti-imperialist citizenship, describing the ideal post-colonial subject as one who is no longer securely capable or desirous of distinguishing between “us” and “them.” Rather, the hybrid post-colonial subject is one who, in Clifford Geertz’s formulation, inhabits a globalised world in which there is a “gradual spectrum of mixed-up differences” (Geertz, 1988: 148). Foregrounding complication and entanglement over a stridently expressed singular identity, this notion dovetailed neatly with flourishing post-modern ideas of relativism and pluralism, both expressing a mistrust of discourses of authenticity and origin.

So, when – particularly in his work of the 1990s – Sundaram alludes to the work of artists within what constitutes an ostensibly consensual Western art-historical canon, the choices he makes are always politically and historically knowing. They are played within the polyphony of artistic voices that reverberate across his work, in which the distinction between “Indian” and “Western” loses its hold or is smudged with irony. Frequently, the relationship between “Indianness” and global trends is complex rather than binary, particularly in the ways in which the readymade is pitted against Indian craft traditions of recycling. Moreover, it is a mark of the restlessness of his intellectual and aesthetic appetite that Sundaram seeks to juxtapose layered art-historical allusions with more direct, changing responses to the world around him; to the historical, social and political issues that shape it .

These are the parameters in which Sundaram’s photographic work will be addressed in the following pages. Because the artist’s practice is so diverse and follows no linear stylistic trajectory, rather than being exhaustive in listing all his uses of photography, I have chosen to

focus on bodies of work where photographic images play a significant – or indeed foundational – role. There are very few stand-alone photographic works: *Marxism in the Expanded Field* (1999) is one. With its title alluding to Rosalind Krauss's famous essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" (Krauss: [1979] 1983) in which a range of intermedial practices was mapped onto a conceptual grid, Sundaram's image playfully engages with the relationship between Marxism and aesthetics. A shelf belonging to his wife, art historian and critic, Geeta Kapur, is crammed with books whose spines give us a fascinating glimpse into the political and philosophic range of interests of this brilliant writer, while tantalisingly withholding any further information. A related *Column for Marx* is made of piled up books, taking its inspiration (as do several other works by Sundaram) from Brancusi's *Endless Column*. It incorporates both a backlit photograph and Mao's red book, signalling, on a formal level, a persistent fascination with the relationship between "the photographic" and "the sculptural."

I have elected to omit a discussion of the vast *History Project*, with its enfolded explorations of the legacies of colonialism, the history of labour in India, the historical and modern roles of women in India, the ideological underpinnings of architecture, the relationship between memorialisation and the archive, and much more. This is a book-sized topic in its own right, meriting the excellent publication that has already been dedicated to it (see Bhabha et al, 2017). *History Project* absorbs many of Sundaram's recurrent and wide-ranging interests: in history and politics, in documents and monuments, in archives and their limitations and exclusions.

In the interweaving of works – the migration of earlier into later works, the returns and revisions – we see images transitioning from one body of work to another, not all of which are addressed here. So, for instance, the family archive that furnished images for *The Sher-Gil Archive* (1995-7) and *Re-take of Amrita* (2001-2), is also the source for *Indira's Piano* (2002-3), a two-channel video piece. It is important to stress that the incorporation of photography into his installations is only one aspect of Sundaram's recruitment of multiple sources, materials and technologies simultaneously. Moreover, the idea of photographs as archival documents sits alongside his engagement with other forms of archival material through which he (re)assembles and orders the past.

Several early works seem prescient, pointing towards directions taken later. Of these, I select three: *Signs of Fire* (1984); *Engine Oil and Charcoal*, (1991), and *Couples: A Photo Album* (1994). In these works, we see that Sundaram's pleasure in mixing media – his embrace of intermediality – precedes the large-scale installations that have spanned over two decades. As early as 1984, in *Signs of Fire*, he acknowledged the archival nature of his endeavour by employing physical boxes, incorporating them with other found materials, newspaper clippings, and watercolours: the documentary sits side by side with the handmade. In celebrating Indira Gandhi and alluding to her cremation, *Signs of Fire* was also one of Sundaram's earliest works to deal with the idea of the memorial.

In the series *Engine Oil and Charcoal* (1991), marking Sundaram's definitive shift into installation art, he explores the charged idea of "oil," around the time of the first Gulf War. Viscous and visceral realisations blend loose figuration, gestural imprint and blot/spillage. Sheets of paper stitched together hang on the wall vertically, fusing the axes of territory and map and the qualities of both formlessness and calligraphic mark. Then, in his exhibition *Collaborations/Combines* held at the Shridharani Gallery, New Delhi in 1992, Sundaram further excavated the possibilities of installation via assemblage. Constructed out of diverse materials (wood, paper, bamboo, zinc, charcoal and engine oil among others), these pieces bear the manual traces of fabrication (constructing, sewing, gluing, bolting) and violent destruction (gouging, burning and slashing).

Finally, a video piece made in 1994 in Vancouver, as part of a residency at Western Front, an artist-run centre founded in 1973 by eight artists for the exploration of new media and forms, announced the motif of the family album that has played a central role in some several of Sundaram's work. In *Couples: A Photo Album*, Sundaram convened random individuals from different cultural contexts into staged couple video portraits, light-heartedly simulating – and thereby also agitating – the testimonial role of the family album.

Against the background of this exploratory and increasingly diversified practice, Sundaram's uses of photography have entailed the ability and desire to peel apart the photographic image from its support, the historical binding of image to photosensitive paper. No sooner is photography embraced, than the idea of the photograph as a "picture" is put

under the knife. In two works included in *Collaborations/Combines*, *Stone Column Mirroring Postcards*, and *Stone Column Enclosing the Gaze* (both 1992), modernist-inspired sandstone columns are fitted with Perspex and – scandalously to any modernist purist – used as shelving supports for postcards exchanged with colleagues, or black and white photographs juxtaposed with quotations from Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*. These works stand as testimony to the growing viability, for Sundaram, of the generic object of art (an object made using any means, material and immaterial) superseding the specific mediums of painting, sculpture, photography, film and sound.

In chapter 1, I examine Sundaram’s celebrated body of work, *Re-take of Amrita*, after considering the earlier installation in which he used the same family archive as source: *The Sher-Gil Archive*. Here, Sundaram includes, alongside photographs as archival documents, other evocative objects, creating a contemplative, elegiac work that urges the viewer to consider the constructions that support familial memorialisation. I point to the ways in which Sundaram undertakes the transformation of archive from personal or public repository to artistic form or medium, using found objects (including found photographs). Such found objects have played a fulcral role in the work of archival artists seeking to “make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present” (Foster, 2004: 4). To this end, the found image (or object, or text) and the installation format are generally favoured: in this, Sundaram operates in accordance with a contemporary paradigm. In this paradigm, as Hal Foster describes it in his foundational text, “An Archival Impulse,” the artist “not only draws on informal archives but produces them as well, and does so in a way that underscores the nature of all archival materials as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private” (Foster, 2004: 5). Both in *The Sher-Gil Archive* and in *Re-take of Amrita*, Sundaram underlines the contingent – I would venture to say the constructed – nature of the archive itself, probing its exclusions and what Foster calls “the sense of failure in cultural memory” (Foster, 2004: 21) through the establishment of new, fictional counter-narratives. He thus throws light on the unstable relation between memory and history, their points of confluence and divergence.

In *Re-take of Amrita*, I argue, family album and/or family archive furnish the artist with the materials through which he constructs a potential narrative: a counter-history founded on

desire. In this important body of work, the photographs from the original archive (mostly, though not exclusively, authored by the artist's grandfather, Umrao Singh Sher-Gil) function as found objects or readymades, both central to Sundaram's practice. Employing digital cutting, cloning and montage, he creates a *détournement* of the family's archive, (re)fashioning the versions of history staged by his grandfather, literalising the Freudian family romance by fabricating its evidence. He thereby introduces the suggestion that the past itself, like other *objets trouvés*, is available to a new and different integration. Such reconfigurations render the past not over and done with, but ever open to possibility. In exploring how Sundaram forecloses the workings of linear narrative through suturing segments from different places and times as a means of reflecting on trauma and its after-effects, I show how he figures the co-presence of the dead and the living in ways that are both oneiric and cinematographic. Various essayed, this procedure, I suggest, reconfigures as filmic fiction Barthes' idea that "the photograph" announces "death in future" (Barthes, [1980] 1997).

In Chapter 2, I turn from private to public memorialisation. This chapter deals almost exclusively with the installation *Memorial*, considered "one of the first fully realized installations in India" (Kapur, 2017: 92). Here, I address the temporal conundrums encapsulated in the very notion of memorialisation, exploring the dialectics of memory and forgetfulness that acts of memorialisation necessarily entail. Contrary to *The Sher-Gil Archive* and *Re-take of Amrita*, *Memorial* is a conceptual and material elaboration based on a single (found) photographic image. The image, by photojournalist Hoshi Jal, shows a corpse lying in the street: humanity transformed into inanimate matter as the outcome of state-sponsored rioting. I outline how Sundaram probes the condition of "the unknown civilian" (as opposed to the more commonly commemorated "unknown soldier"), whose violent death is marked in *Memorial*, not by documentary means, but through a series of actions undertaken upon the body-of-the-photograph, even as it stands in for the fallen human body. *Memorial* is, furthermore, explored as an installation that requires ambulatory spectatorship, inviting a consideration of the role that public engagement might play in works of art. Underlying these considerations is the age-old question about the compatibility of the political and the aesthetic, and the ways in which a work of art might embody ethical claims.

In Chapter 3, I further probe the ways in which Sundaram's art embodies ethical claims. I consider two bodies of work using photography, both made against the backdrop of New Delhi as metropolis, or even megalopolis. *Great Indian Bazaar* (1997) and *Trash* (2008) both deal with the underbelly of that city, and both explore the concept of value. In different ways, these projects probe the passage of objects from intimate ownership to item of exchange or sale, finally to trash or refuse, reflecting a transition of value from affective to monetary to negative. Not least, Sundaram's work also explores the "object-document's mnemonic and archaeological value" (Kapur, 2017: 93), while highlighting the tenuous taxonomic categories that separate the archive from trash, retrieval from relinquishment. Within the ontological parameters of the contemporary work of art, I argue, to lay bare the transition of an object from utilitarian to readymade is equally to sound questions of value. In both bodies of work, moreover, I attempt to show how Sundaram is concerned with the paradoxes inhering in the obsolescence of material goods under capitalism: in the first case, in relation to the parallel economies bred by a huge wealth differential; and in the second, in relation to the alarming consequences of the absence of infrastructures capable of keeping up with the amount of waste generated by the accelerated pace of consumption attendant on growth and globalisation.

In *The Great Indian Bazaar*, Sundaram employs the form of the modest snapshot to track the sale of second hand goods in a street market used by the poorest of the poor. While the photographs themselves capture the idea of trade in a Third World megalopolis, their mode of agglomeration and exhibition establishes a conversation with other existing works of art, once again pointing to a practice in which political engagement cohabits with an immersion in the idioms of modern and contemporary art. For *Trash*, the uses of photography are, as I show, entirely different: Sundaram has produced large format prints, in which aerial views of a diorama laboriously constructed out of reclaimed waste are subjected to a sophisticated system of digital postproduction. I explore the many ways in which *Trash* asks us to think about the socioeconomics and aesthetics of recycling, also inviting us to consider power, surveillance and point of view, all the while rehearsing a history of modernist still life and its encounter with the art of assemblage. Finally, I point to ways in which, in *Trash*, Sundaram continues to



explore his fascination with the archive, offering an anti-archive responding to the problems of over-bureaucratisation and environmental catastrophe.

In the final chapter, before concluding with observations that move away from the specific – in a bid to map out the broad constellation of concerns that characterise Sundaram’s work more generally – I examine two interrelated bodies of photographic work, *Black Gold* (2012) and *Terraoptics* (2016). This entails laying bare the methodological underpinnings that these two related projects share with *Trash*, while equally examining the ways in which discards – in this instance, potsherds from an archaeological dig attempting to locate the mythic South Indian city of Muziris – are re-imbued with value as art installations that rely, for their symbolic completion, on exploratory, experimental ways of being photographically recorded. Both bodies of work, I furthermore argue, vex the interface between still life and landscape, enlisting the skills of a photographic operator in ways that perform the dynamic, unpredictable and synergistic exchanges that have underpinned Sundaram’s audacious artistic practice since the 1990s.

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<sup>1</sup> The bibliography dealing with the paradigm shift from analogue to digital photographic practice is extensive. I name but some of the contributions to this growing field: Mitchell, [1992] 2001; Lister, 1995; Amelunxen, Iglhaut and Rötzer, 1996; Manovich, 2001; van Dijck, 2003; Ritchin, 2008; Shore, 2014; Larsen and Sandbye, 2014; Cotton, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term “staged photography” to describe an image not captured spontaneously, but carefully, and more or less elaborately, set up by the artist/photographer. The term “constructed photography” here refers to images – usually, though not necessarily digital – that have been produced by different forms of artifice that might be more or less “photographic.” Various contemporary photographic practitioners over the past two decades have fused the two methods. “The Staged and Constructed Image” was the title of a lecture I gave at the Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi on 8 November, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes stresses that chemistry was more important even than the *camera lucida* in making the invention of photography possible, as it is the capture on light-sensitive paper that brought about the quality of pastness (“that-has-been”) that was so intrinsic an aspect of his photographic ontology (see Barthes, [1980]1997: 87).

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<sup>4</sup> The notion that a photograph is indexically linked to its referent is, arguably, not the only plausible model of the photographic imprint. Leaning on the earlier and lesser known of Walter Benjamin's two important essays on photography, Kaja Silverman makes a case for the model of "analogy" instead of that of indexical imprint (Silverman, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Although analogue images could be changed and manipulated – the falsification of photographs under Stalin is a famous case in point (see King, 1997) – digital images are, by their very nature, much more susceptible to alteration. W. J. Mitchell puts it thus: "the stored array of integers has none of the fragility and recalcitrance of the photograph's emulsion-coated surface [...] the essential characteristic of digital information is that it *can* be manipulated easily and very rapidly by the computer. It is simply a matter of substituting new digits for old. [...] So the art of the digital image cannot adequately be understood as primarily a matter of capture and printing [...]: intermediate *processing* of images plays a central role" (Mitchell, [1992] 2001: 7).

<sup>6</sup> The conceptual contemporaries Sambrani cites – younger colleagues in the use of the readymade and the fragmentary – are Anita Dube, Atul Dodiya, Nataraj Sharma, Kausik Mukhopadhyay, Sarmila Samant and Subodh Gupta. Geeta Kapur (Kapur 2017) adds other names of artists working with installation, including Nalini Malani, Navjot Altaf and Rummana Hussain, while also situating Sundaram's work alongside that of international artists such as Christian Boltanski, Ilya Kabakov, Sarkis, Thomas Hirschhorn, Chen Zhen and Zhu Huan

<sup>7</sup> David Houston Jones uses the term "archivalism" much as Hal Foster uses "archival artist," to define "contemporary artistic engagement with the archive and [...] the emerging critical field which is now forming around it" (Houston Jones, 2016: loc. 184).

<sup>8</sup> The status or condition of "installation artist" releases artists from being bound to, and constrained by, the historical trajectories of specific mediums. Some have argued that "interrelationality" – the requirement that a visitor be present, and that the work entail an "encounter" – defines installation art.

<sup>9</sup> In an influential essay published in 1964, Arthur Danto (Danto, 1964) conflates the invention of something called "the art world" with a particular, viewer-centred form of art history, the origin of which he traces to Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1913). Wikipedia gives a working definition of "the art world" as comprising "everyone producing, commissioning, presenting, preserving, promoting, chronicling, criticizing and selling fine art" ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art\\_world](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_world), consulted 25.09.2018). This is useful, but it presumes a singular or coherent art world. Rather, there are parallel strata: several different systems co-exist independently as separate "worlds", paying little heed to one another and operating according to different criteria and status hierarchies. The "world" of contemporary art, with its biennales and fairs, its critics and curators, operates according to a finely calibrated system of prestige and valuation, which, I suspect, might be fairly consensual among readers of this book, though not necessarily easy to define.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas McEvilley, however, sees it differently: in these three sartorial options within an intimate setting, he reads "suggestions of the isolation of India, of its enclosure in the private dream of the Tradition, and of the variety of conflicting forces pulling it in different directions" (McEvilley, 1986/1992: 122).