



1984, includes responses from writers, poets, theorists and the voices of those who witnessed the carnage or became inheritors of its terrible consequences. Photo: Gauri Gill

EYE SPY: The work of mourning

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[Somak Ghoshal](#)

Gauri Gill's haunting photographs of the victims and survivors of the 1984 Sikh pogrom have a claim on our collective conscience

“Beyond the moment recorded and the present moment of looking at the photograph, there is an abyss,” novelist and art critic [John Berger](#) wrote, “no invented story, no explanation offered will be quite as present as the banal appearances preserved in the photograph.” The statement came back to me last week when I was looking at [Gauri Gill](#)'s photographs of the families of the victims and survivors of the Sikh pogrom that erupted in Delhi after Prime Minister [Indira Gandhi](#) was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984.

Presented as a booklet that Gill is giving away at INSERT2014, a month-long arts initiative in the city curated by the Raqs Media Collective, some of the photographs have appeared in new magazines accompanying reports. Gill, who is known for her fine work *The Americans*, a series documenting the lives of Indians living in the North American diaspora, made these images in two phases. After the Justice Nanavati Commission report came out in 2005, and was widely criticized for failing to be fair to the victims of 1984, she went and photographed the anger, disappointment and the discontent. Then, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the riots in 2009, she travelled to different parts of Delhi to visit the families of the victims and survivors living in resettlement colonies.

1984, as Gill calls this body of work, includes responses from writers, poets, theorists and, of course, the voices of those who witnessed the carnage or became inheritors of its

terrible consequences. She invited various people, who were not necessarily affected by the tragedy or eye-witnesses to it, to express the feelings evoked in them by isolated images. The idea is not as simple as it sounds, for it requires the viewer to wager a leap of faith and risk plunging into the “abyss” that Berger speaks of. If the respondents to the photographs did not have any directly personal connection with the events of 1984, they were reminded of similar atrocities, such as the 2002 riots in Gujarat. Some were struck by a detail. Writer Jaspreet Singh, whose latest novel *Helium* is a memorial to the riots of 1984, remarked on the ear of the girl seen in the picture above: “It made me pause, and I heard the hum of painful stories she must have heard over and over,” writes Singh, “The same ear, I felt, would have preserved the shape of her grandmother’s voice.” The image occupies a full page of Singh’s novel at a critical juncture in the plot.

While the force of grief may be palpable in many of the images, there are some that are muted and dignified, even seemingly distant—their point, it seems, is to make us realize that we can never truly know their inner miseries. Yet, In spite of the “banal appearances” of the trappings of daily life in the frames, it is hard to miss the air of melancholy about them. A young girl sits on a bed reading a book; three framed portraits hang on a wall behind a refrigerator; a young man sits on a chair with his face downcast—even without looking at the captions, we feel in our guts the morbid heaviness of these images. Stark and chilling, Gill’s photographs are shockingly immediate and yet, they are also haunted by the persistence of memory—or rather, the ironic absence of it, as the case may be. Looking at them involves an exercise in empathy; we are compelled to imagine a past that may not have been ours to relate to, but still has a claim on our collective conscience. Whether you choose to own the legacy of 1984, or how you do it, it will own you—and will continue to do so—in the most comfortless way.

1984, part of INSERT2014, can be seen at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi till .

A fortnightly look at the world of art from close and afar.

Somak Ghosal: Eye Spy: The work of mourning, Mint newspaper, 2014