

Paul Sternberger

ME, MYSELF AND INDIA

Contemporary Indian photography and the diasporic experience

Recent Indian photographers have used their medium to reveal, interpret, and influence the multifaceted nature of Indian identity and cross-cultural experiences in India and abroad. This paper explores a selection of these photographers' strategies, which range from relatively straightforward photo essays on Indian experience overseas by Pablo Bartholomew, Omar Badsha and Gauri Gill, to Ketaki Sheth's meditations on the creation of personal space and identity within larger, shared contexts of family, local community, and nation, to explorations of deeply private realms of interpersonal relationships by Sunil Gupta and Allan deSouza, to Annu Palakunnathu Matthew's satirical self-portraiture as a way of deconstructing national and racial identity. Ultimately, artists such as Shilpa Gupta refocus their attention away from local communities and onto more global issues.

The Indian diaspora, estimated at over twenty million people, covers practically every part of the world, numbering more than a million each in eleven different countries (*The Indian Diaspora*). The history and dynamics of Indians moving abroad is complex and multifaceted, but a few broad patterns of emigration emerge. The first wave began in the 1830s when Indians migrated overseas to meet labor demands after the abolition of slavery in British, French, and Dutch colonies. During the post-Second World War period, a second wave of Indian emigration took place to more industrially developed countries such as Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. And most recently, Indian emigration to West Asia and the Middle East has risen dramatically, meeting demand for contracted labor and service industries (Kadekar 24–31).

With such large numbers of Indians living abroad in so many different parts of the world, and with populations of Indians who have been settled in other cultures for anything from a few years to several generations, diasporic experiences are bound to be diverse. Many Indian photographers have recently used their medium to reveal, interpret, and shape the multifaceted nature of Indian identity and cross-cultural experiences of Indians abroad. These photographers' strategies range from relatively straightforward photo essays on Indian life overseas, to explorations of deeply private introspection, to satirical self-portraiture that deconstructs national and racial identity. These photographic strategies echo traditions that have impacted Indian self-representation throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Influential Indian photographers such as Sunil Janah, Kishore Parekh, S. Paul, and Raghu Rai, along with Westerners in India such as Henri Cartier-Bresson and Margaret Bourke-White,

created a legacy of street photography and photojournalism that formed a firm foundation on which younger generations have built upon the notion of the photograph as an analytical and interpretive document. In this tradition, Pablo Bartholomew and Omar Badsha examine the Indian diaspora, using the camera as a tool of reasoned observation that can explore the place of Indian identity within other cultural contexts. Gauri Gill and Ketaki Sheth also build upon photography as a documentary medium, but they are more self-conscious and openly analytical as they document people of Indian origin living abroad. Sunil Gupta and Allan deSouza shed the mantle of photographic objectivity, exploring the diasporic experience in a resolutely personal and subjective manner, creating multifaceted, enigmatic pictorial expressions that fuse personal and cultural, memory and identity. Diverging even further from photography as a documentary medium, artists such as Annu Palakunnathu Matthew and Shilpa Gupta construct images and fabricate contexts in order to critique Indian identity within a larger historical and global context. Ultimately, an artist like Gupta uses photography to underscore global context in a manner that begins to overshadow the negotiation of Indian identity that pervades much of the work dealing with the Indian diaspora.

The photojournalist Pablo Bartholomew is testimony that national identity can be much more complex than one might first assume. While his name may not sound so, he is in fact Indian. He was named after Picasso by his parents, a half-Burmese half-Syrian-Christian photographer/art critic and a well-known Indian dancer. A rebellious fearlessness got Bartholomew expelled from school in Delhi and led to his immersion in the lurid subcultures of India in the 1970s, which he documented with his camera. With a sense of objective distance coupled with keen insight, he earned an international reputation as a photojournalist, perhaps best known for his images of the aftermath of the deadly 1984 Union Carbide gas leaks in Bhopal. In the hands of photographers such as Bartholomew, the camera offers glimpses into the Indian cultural fabric, creating not only documents of the social landscape or witnesses to historical events but also focused cultural commentary and analysis.

Bartholomew traveled to the United States in 1987 on a grant from the Asian Arts Council in order to, as he puts it,

examine the two worlds of the migrant Indian – the inner world which he brought within himself; the world of roots, religion, of tradition – of “Indianness” – and to see how much of it was retained and preserved in the exterior world – the world he or she currently lives in. What is the relationship between the two? How does one world manifest itself in the other? What are the relationships, adjustments, juxtapositions of signs and images that might explain the truth between the two worlds?

(Bartholomew 1994)

In the series which he calls *The Indians in America* or *The Émigrés*, Bartholomew photographs Indians living in the United States, documenting their negotiation of cultural heritage and physical place. These frank visual descriptions of Indians, in the environments that define them within the American landscape, investigate a spectrum of the Indian diasporic experience, from the lobbies of seedy motels to cutting-edge laboratories (see figure 1).



FIGURE 1 Pablo Bartholomew, *One of the Many Patel Motels, Fresno, 1987*. Courtesy of the artist.

Large-scale migration of Indians to the United States started only after the repeal of the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965. By 2000, more than 1–1.5 million Indians lived in the United States (Kadekar 26). Yet Bartholomew is interested not only in these recent émigrés but also in populations of Indians who had come to the West Coast of the United States much earlier in the twentieth century. Indians such as Nand Kaur (see figure 2), pictured in her Yuba City, California, living room with her sixty-three-year-old son, a Second World War American army war veteran who damaged his eyesight in Okinawa. Spending most of her lifetime in the United States, Nand Kaur married in India and then came to the United States in the 1920s with her husband, who already had US citizenship. In 1924, they settled in the Yuba City, California, one of the oldest communities of Indians in America, and there she raised seven children (Bartholomew, Personal email correspondence). The image of Kaur is typical of Bartholomew's matter-of-fact style in the series, the subject aware of the photographer's presence, placed in surroundings that help define who the person is. With the juxtapositions of generations of Kaur and the old portraits on the walls of their bland American house, the photograph underscores the process of intercultural negotiation as what Bartholomew saw as an “ever-evolving” process.

Bartholomew himself explains the variety of Indian experiences in America he hopes to reveal, from successful scientists, scholars and businessmen to the more anonymous lives of those struggling to find their place. He makes photos which “counterpoise the struggle with the success, the humor with the irony; to look at rites and rituals in everyday life such as births, marriages, death, and community and religious occasions in the context of their shifting cultural and physical landscapes” (Bartholomew 1994). Indeed, many of Bartholomew's photographs focus on



FIGURE 2 Pablo Bartholomew, *Nand Kaur, Yuba City*, 1987. Courtesy of the artist.

intercultural dialogues, like his images of multinational weddings and Indian-style ceremonies in American contexts (see figure 3). As Bartholomew documents it, the Indian diasporic experience is a delicate fusion of assimilation and integration tempered by the preservation of traditions and values.

Like Bartholomew, South African photojournalist Omar Badsha's photographic subjects include a population of Indian origin negotiating Indianness outside of India. Badsha was born in Durban, South Africa, to a Muslim family who had, in the late 1880s, emigrated to South Africa from Gujarat in western India. The subject of Badsha's investigation is indeed his own community. However, his concept of community extends far beyond an isolated population of Indian origin, including instead all those disenfranchised by the legalized racial segregation of apartheid. According to Badsha, "we fought against being defined as 'Non Whites' ... if you lived in apartheid and you were involved in the struggle, it was not just a political struggle but a cultural struggle", and part of that struggle was "to see us Blacks in new ways – not as victims, but as people living in a complex multicultural society and not as the whites saw us" (Badsha, Personal email correspondence). In addition to his role as a photographer and artist of the Indian diaspora, Badsha is also a political activist, trade union leader and historian. To Badsha, photography can be an instrument of reasoned observation that he believes will lead to both cultural and personal insights. He not only explores the cultural forces shaping the subjects in front of his lens but also hopes that the act of photographing his own community might help him to understand more fully who he is. Badsha sees photography as, in his words, "a tool to help me map my way out of the racial maze, created over a century of colonialism, apartheid and my own 'Indianness'" (Badsha, "Imperial Ghetto" 511).



FIGURE 3 Pablo Bartholomew, *Second Generation Mixed-Blood Indian-Mexican Marrying a Venezuelan Woman*, 1987. Courtesy of the artist.

In the series *The Imperial Ghetto*, produced over the course of the 1980s, Badsha concentrates on documenting the Grey Street area of Durban, a section of the city that had evolved into a repository of ex-indentured laborers and tradesmen of Indian origin and African migrant workers. Through “the ubiquitous state segregationist and apartheid legislation” the area had become understood “as the commercial, political and cultural heart of the country’s immigrant Indian community” (Badsha, “Imperial Ghetto” 512). In photographs like his image of the elderly couple Mr and Mrs Hafajee (see figure 4), Badsha pictures people whose lives have been shaped by apartheid – the 1950 Group Areas Act had forced physical separation of races through the creation of designated residential areas. To be of Indian origin in Durban is, for Badsha, a complicated proposition. On one hand, he is simply black, where black is defined as non-white, and his photographs of places such as Patel’s Refreshment House (see figure 5) reveal the intermingling of non-white cultures in the *Imperial Ghetto*. On the other hand, he is part of a community that, even after generations of separation from India, is not Indian, but retains a sense of cultural connection with India, not only in religious and secular ritual but also in the rhythms of everyday life. In the photograph of the men performing *Rathie* (see figure 6), Badsha represents a ceremony performed by some Muslim sects in which participants enter a trance-like state and pierce themselves with sharp objects to demonstrate the power of faith over flesh. Badsha writes of attempting to define an inclusive Africanness that could also incorporate a broad understanding of Indianness:



FIGURE 4 Omar Badsha, *Mr. & Mrs. Hafajee, Last Residents of North Street to be Moved by the Group Areas Act, 1982*. Courtesy of the artist.

these pictures are about new narratives. About how we draw new plans and stake out new boundaries and redefine ourselves. They are about the need to bridge the gap between the haves and the have-nots and about healing the fault lines of race, language and ethnicity. They are about a time and space pregnant with new beginnings and new reinterpretations of the past, and ... the voices of reason and progress.

(Badsha, "Imperial Ghetto" 512)

For Badsha, a photograph of a boy can be a document of a specific individual at a particular time in history, or it can be an emblem of the shared experience of generations in South Africa.

Ketaki Sheth, one of India's most celebrated street photographers, is best known for works in which the photographer serves as an insightful witness, spontaneously capturing life as it unfurls before her camera. She has explored the spectacle of Mumbai, including its "tinsel world of movies and private parties as well as the lives of less glamorous urban dwellers (Sheth, "Ketaki Sheth" 74–75). With an interest in the juxtaposition of ordinary people with icons of both religious and popular culture, her images underscore the presence of vast, shared experiences of public space and public personae that can coexist ambiguously within the private personal realm of the individual. Living in London in the 1990s, Sheth was inspired to develop a new body of work when she happened across a sizable directory of people with the family name Patel living in Britain. In this work, Sheth sheds the mantle of spontaneous witness. Instead, she makes a series of portraits of Patels, specifically Patel twins, first in Britain and then in the Indian state of Gujarat. Sheth's project, published as the 1999



FIGURE 5 Omar Badsha, *Migrant Worker with Son*, Patel's Refreshment House, Brook Street, 1984. Courtesy of the artist.



FIGURE 6 Omar Badsha, *Devotees Performing Rathie*, Grey Street, 1980. Courtesy of the artist.

book *Twinspotting*, presents more than 100 pairs of Patel twins in Britain and in Gujarat. The resultant body of photographs offers more than presentations of physical likeness or evidence of a genetic disposition to multiples – it is a meditation on the creation of personal space and identity within larger, shared contexts of family, local community, and nation. The twins appear in their homes and neighborhoods, in their shops and in their villages. Comfortably ensconced in their British middle-class settings, or stolidly rooted to their Gujarati farms, they are defined as much by their place and surroundings as by their families and their names.

Sheth had little trouble finding subjects for *Twinspotting*, but that ease is not as much evidence of a Patel propensity toward twins as it is testimony to the size of the population into which Sheth could tap. Most of the twins she photographs in Britain belong to a population of tens of thousands of Patels who migrated to the United Kingdom not from India but from various former British colonies such as Kenya and Uganda. A particularly large wave of immigrants of Indian descent came to Britain in the early 1970s. In 1972, Idi Amin forced all people of Asian descent to abandon their property and savings and leave Uganda, creating an influx of tens of thousands of nearly penniless Patels into Britain (Kadekar 12). The family of Priya and Prima (see figure 7) emigrated from Uganda, while Ramesh and Suresh (see figure 8) were born in Uganda and, after emigrating separately to Britain in 1967 and 1972, eventually followed their father into careers as shopkeepers (Sheth, *Twinspotting* 86–87). The project in Britain reveals to Sheth a retention of the cores of Patel identity, even in families that had been separated from India for generations. While they had integrated themselves into Britain socially and economically, she finds shared tendencies in diet, rituals, choice of spouse and reverence for their homeland. In fact, she notes that some habits and tastes were more uniform among Patels in Britain, noting, for instance, the striking similarities in domestic decoration among British Patels, while the Patels' taste in India was apt to be more individualistic (Sheth, Author's interview).

After photographing Patels in Britain, Sheth went to Charotar in Gujarat to photograph Patels who had not emigrated. The subjects of Sheth's photograph, Yesha and Niddhi (see figure 9), are the daughters of a tobacco farmer who worked in a state-owned textile mill until it was closed down (Sheth, *Twinspotting* 87). Exploring the Patel populations in India, Sheth reveals complex subcultures and hierarchies within the communities. Two hundred thirty-eight villages of Patels can be found in the rural region of Charotar. There, the name Patel dates back to the fifteenth century, deriving from a term for agrarian record-keepers, and it was a title bestowed by the Moghul emperors on those who sorted out disputes between villagers. Even today, the Patel populations divide themselves into clusters of villages known as *gols*. This phenomenon is unique to the Patels and because some *gols* are more powerful and prestigious than others, they create a social hierarchy. The communities also make distinctions between rural and urban Patels (Sheth, *Twinspotting* iii–ix). Like the work of Bartholomew and Badsha, Sheth's work on the Patels underscores the complexity and subtlety of Indian identity, even when the photographic examination focuses on a relatively small fragment of the Indian diaspora and the community they left behind.

In her series on Indians living in America, Gauri Gill presents single and paired photographs of Indians in America. Gauri Gill has photographed Indian immigrants in



FIGURE 7 Ketaki Sheth, *Priya and Prima, in their Grandmother's Backyard, Harrow, Middlesex, 1995*.
Courtesy of the artist and Sepia International, New York.



FIGURE 8 Ketaki Sheth, *Ramesh and Suresh, in Ramesh's House, Wembley, Middlesex, 1997*.
Courtesy of the artist and Sepia International, New York.



FIGURE 9 Ketaki Sheth, *Yesha and Niddhi, on the Swing of their Porch, Piplav, Gujarat, 1998*.
Courtesy of the artist and Sepia International, New York.

the United States since 1993, first as a student in New York, then in the San Francisco area and Washington, DC. More recently, she traveled through the American South, exploring the Indian place in the post-9/11 American landscape. Gill theorizes her work in a framework of sociological analysis, citing statistical evidence and demographic details, such as census figures, immigration histories, lists of occupations, and annual incomes. In the series published in the 2008 book *The Americans* (in homage to Robert Frank's book of a half-century earlier), Gill documents facets of Indian experience in America, while at the same time unflinchingly exploring an American social landscape in which banal icons of contemporary culture testify to the values of an era. Gill writes in her artist's statement for the series that she hopes her "work shows some of the details and dramas of daily life, how individuals navigate their circumstances, and selves, in a new country. How does one adapt and yet retain one's soul? Can one — where is the resistance? Is this one's place after all, or is one perennially out of place?" (Gill, "The Americans"). Gill immerses herself in the twenty-first-century American experience in which transplanted Indians occupy a realm dominated by vinyl-sided housing developments, Dunkin' Donuts and trashy pop-star fashion (see figures 10 and 11). Gill shows Indians firmly entrenched in suburban sprawl, engaged in religious and secular rituals that embrace both Indian tradition and contemporary American values.

In addition to single images, Gill includes diptychs in *The Americans* (see figure 12). Gill's diptychs in the series venture farthest away from photographic reportage and reach beyond a distanced documentary objectivity. The works of photographers like Pablo Bartholomew and Omar Badsha tend to depend on a kind of dispassionate,



FIGURE 10 Gauri Gill, *Mahavir from Gujarat at his Workplace, Dunkin' Donuts, Knoxville, Tennessee*, 2004. Courtesy of the artist.

anthropological, almost clinical distance on the part of the photojournalists, a distance that encourages the viewer to believe that the subjects speak for themselves. In contrast, Gill's diptychs begin to suggest a more enigmatic, subjective, psychological realm, on the part of both the photographer and the subjects of the photos. Jack Kerouak wrote of Frank's *Americans* that the artist "sucked a sad poem right out of America onto film", and it is in her diptychs that Gill comes closest to that poetry (Kerouak 9). By pairing the images as she does, Gill creates a tension between her subjects and their environments, between the individual and a larger communal identity. The solitary groom in the first half of (see figure 12) exudes a pensive air of self-absorbed disillusionment, while the second half of the image suggests the staged superficiality of the celebration taking place within a vacuous and impersonal event space. Gill is conscious of this intensified subjectivity in her photographs, and sees the introspection of the images not as antithetical to sociological analysis but rather as a



FIGURE 11 Gauri Gill, *Ladies Room at a Bhangra Rap Party at Venture Frogs Nightclub, San Francisco, 2002*. Courtesy of the artist.

complement to it, one that might actually catalyze social change. Gill writes that, as she examined America, she “photographed both as an insider and outsider. I continue to return, and believe this work is necessary because it is as essential for Americans to look inwards, at the many Americas within, as it is to look out upon the world” (Gill, “The Americans”).

As Indian photographers like Gill have intensified their insistence on the understanding of their work as personal interpretation and expression rather than as analytical records of the world, they became more makers of images, rather than finders of them. These more obviously constructive artistic practices can be just as intense in their investigation of contemporary cultural conditions as a photojournalistic,



FIGURE 12 Gauri Gill, *Wedding of Dr Suresh Gupta's Son, Virginia, 2002*. Courtesy of the artist.

documentary, or street photography approach. But they insist on an acknowledgement of a subjective filter through which the world is interpreted. Like Gill, Sunil Gupta insists on individualized interpretive and expressive content in his photographs. With roots in street photography, nurtured in New York by mentors such as Lisette Model, Gupta began his early career intending to engage what he called “a form of liberal photojournalism” (Gupta, *Pictures from Here* 10). Yet he was troubled by both the superficiality of traditional photojournalistic narrative and the ease with which it could become touristic or ethnographic. Gupta began to focus more intently on social issues that were relevant to his personal experience as an HIV-positive gay man. His 1986 series *Exiles* “visualized the experience of gay men in Delhi”, a subculture he feels was “particularly vulnerable as a group and didn’t have a recognizable place in society” (Gupta, *Exiles*).

In addition to addressing sexual orientation and HIV as facets of his self, Gupta also explores his identity shaped by his multinational experience. Gupta has dual Canadian and Indian citizenship, and for many years had homes in both London and Delhi. “If here is in one’s head”, he writes, “then mine is in Delhi, as a kind of romantic ideal, with part of me in the familial safe haven of Canada. My body has rooted in South London” (Gupta, *Pictures from Here* 10). Gupta’s work can address the broadest social issues or the most intimate personal experience. He makes series of photographs, often presented in diptychs, about multiple national identities and the challenges of navigating the intricate labyrinth of each nation’s subcultures. In these diptychs from his *Homelands* series (see figures 13 and 14), Gupta juxtaposes images of places he has called home over the years, including northern India, the northeastern United States and eastern Canada. He does this not simply to create East/West dualities, but rather explores a variety of resonances between the pictures, from compositional relationships to private associations. Throughout *Homelands*, the personal and global specter of HIV remains a constant. When Gupta juxtaposes a brown cow standing in a field with an enigmatic self-portrait, he suggests what one observer called a “clash of ideas, at once comic and despairing: We could chuckle cynically at the comparison of an HIV positive man to a (sacred?) cow or feel an immigrant’s sorrowful disconnection from his culture” (Sunil Gupta, *Love & Light*).



FIGURE 13 Sunil Gupta, *AIDS Poster, New Delhi/Act Up Demonstration, Washington, DC, 2001–03*. Courtesy of the artist.



FIGURE 14 Sunil Gupta, *Mundia Pamar, Uttar Pradesh/Chesapeake Bay, Maryland*, 2001–03.
Courtesy of the artist.

As in Gupta's work, a sense of disconnection within the diasporic experience is the topic of a body of work by Allan deSouza, a Kenyan-born artist of Indian descent. In his 2003–04 series *The Lost Pictures* deSouza creates an enigmatic exploration of personal identity, underscoring the physical, temporal, and psychic distance from the land of his youth and the experience of his parents. Prompted, in part, by the death of his mother, deSouza, now living in the United States, undertakes an investigation of his own cultural and familial legacy. He does so not by making new photographs but instead by reconsidering old ones from his family archive. DeSouza begins with slides his father had taken of the family in Kenya during the artist's childhood in Kenya, before the family emigrated to England. He makes prints from the slides and tapes them around his home in heavily-used places such as his bathroom and kitchen, where they accumulate debris, stains and wear from everyday life: hair, skin, blood, food, etc. The prints are then scanned, manipulated digitally and printed at 40 by 60 inches.

The Lost Pictures prints are large, painterly images in which the original photographic image gives way to an aestheticised visualization of a distant, visceral experience of memory, creating what Eve Oishi calls "a physical reflection of memory" (6). In some prints in the series such as *Fountain* (see figure 15), the original image is obscured by wear and accumulation of debris on the intermediary print; in others, such as *Car* (see figure 16), deSouza's digital manipulation of the image with the Photoshop erase tool accentuates the image with a fine web of lines, creating a sense of mosaic or cracleur. DeSouza recounts how his dying mother described a fogging of her inner vision as she lay in her hospital bed, drifting in and out of lucidity (Mack). His images in turn echo this subjective blurring of personal experience, memory, and history – the prints themselves are generations away from the original; they are blurred, scarred and distorted, just as the memories themselves are hazed by time and the dissolution of the body.

While the images may seem to delve so deeply into the realm of the private and the subjective that they escape larger cultural contexts, observers like Okwui Enwezor point out that "... deSouza directs us toward that malady of modern existence: exile, diaspora, dislocation; to the confused itinerary of Indian diasporic communities, from South Asia to East Africa, Europe, and the United States, such has



FIGURE 15 Allan deSouza, *Fountain*, 2004. Courtesy of the artist and Talwar Gallery, New York/ New Delhi.

been the trajectory of the deSouza family'' (33). Closer examination of the subjects of the original snapshots reveals traces of particular moments in a family history, but also of a national and cultural history. Photographs such as *Harambee!* and *Tomorrow* (see figure 17) testify to a moment of national optimism for the young Kenya. "Harambee" means "let's all pull together" and was a slogan of Kenyan independence. The railway billboard proclaiming "... for to-morrow" declared allegiance to the promise of industrialization in the developing country (Mack). Yet, even in the original pictures, the national identities, like the personal ones, seem unresolved, ironic, and superficial: in *Harambee!* the grand aspirations of a young nation are diluted by silliness as deSouza and his siblings gather around a man in a gorilla suit, and in *Tomorrow* they flank a cardboard cutout of a railway worker, making the promise of industrialization seem superficial and deceptive. DeSouza himself envisions *The Lost Pictures* as reflections of larger shared but unresolved cultural experiences as well. He identifies a particularly diasporic "search for visual languages



FIGURE 16 Allan deSouza, *Car*, 2004. Courtesy of the artist and Talwar Gallery, New York/New Delhi.



FIGURE 17 Allan deSouza, *Tomorrow*, 2004. Courtesy of the artist and Talwar Gallery, New York/New Delhi.

to represent experience ... but also to account for ... the incommensurability of experience, perception, and of memory; and in turn, the translation or untranslatability of these into history and identification” (deSouza 11). Indeed, traces of the artist’s own body and daily experience impart a sense of physical immediacy to the prints, a physicality that contrasts deeply with the murky, fugitive images of the past. DeSouza’s *Lost Pictures* reveal that just as time and distance cause individual memory to fade, so dislocation blurs cultural memory.

Born in India, raised in England and now living in the United States, Annu Palakunnathu Matthew also explores the trajectories of the Indian diaspora as well as her relationship to India and its cultural heritage. This exploration takes a variety of forms, including her series *Memories of India*, in which dreamy, atmospheric images suggest a romanticized fantasy created by temporal and geographic distance (see figure 18). Matthew writes of the series, “I look through my camera, it makes my



FIGURE 18 Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, from *Memories of India*, 1999–2003. Courtesy of the artist and Sepia International, New York.

spirit wander, the sound of tambourines awakens memories, visions of my mother, my childhood. Visions of India. Homeland. But where is home?" (Matthew, *Memories of India*). In another series, one she calls *An Indian from India*, Matthew takes a very different approach to the exploration of her Indianness, one in which she uses self-portraiture and satire to deconstruct cultural identities (see figure 19). Matthew refers to her American experience through parodies of vintage photographs of American Indians, cheekily pointing out how her identity has been shaped not only by the assumptions and misunderstandings of contemporary culture but also by the past as well. Imitating the romanticized ethnographic styles of the past in composition and costume, Matthew engages her "otherness" as an Indian living in the United States. "As an immigrant", Matthew writes,

I am often questioned about where I am "really from." When I say that I am Indian, I often have to clarify that I am an Indian from India. Not an American-Indian, but rather an Indian-American, South-Asian Indian or even an Indian-Indian. In this portfolio, I look at the other "Indian." I find similarities [in] how nineteenth-century photographers of Native Americans looked at what they called the primitive natives, similar to the colonial gaze of the nineteenth-century British photographers working in India. In every culture there is the "other."

(Matthew, *An Indian from India*)

"The images highlight assimilation, use labels and make many assumptions", she explains of the series. "I pair these with self-portraits in clothes, poses and



FIGURE 19 Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, *American Indian Wearing Flag–Indian American Wearing Flag as Sari*, 2003. Courtesy of the artist and Sepia International, New York. Original photograph from the Wanamaker Expedition, 1913, courtesy of the Museum of Natural History, New York.



FIGURE 20 Shilpa Gupta, *There is No Explosive in This*, 2007 (Interactive Installation and Photographs). Courtesy of the artist.



FIGURE 21 Shilpa Gupta, *Untitled (There is No Border Here)*, 2005–06 (Installation and Photographs, La Cabaña Fortress, Havana Biennial). Courtesy of the artist.

environments that mimic these ‘older’ images ... I challenge the viewer’s assumptions of then and now, us and them, exotic and local” (Matthew, *An Indian from India*). Even more than Gill or Gupta, Matthew denies her audience the opportunity to accept the photograph as a simple document, and thus she emphasizes the political, social, and historical commentary in her work.

The work of the photographers discussed above has depended on a polarized notion of us and them; inside and outside, and, in fact, the very idea of an Indian diaspora implies polarities – Indian, but not in India. Whether it is the photojournalistic explorations of Pablo Bartholomew, the self-reflective subjectivity of Sunil Gupta, or the constructed self-portraits of Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, photography exploring the Indian diasporic experience has posited Indianness within a larger global context through juxtaposition and differentiation. In contrast, for some Indian artists, particularly for a new generation of young artists, personal and cultural identity naturally extends beyond the borders of India. Critically aware of the post-colonial analysis of race, class and gender, these young Indian artists are wary about playing into easily clichéd categories by addressing notions of “Indianness” within a larger global context. And many young Indian artists use photography as but one of a broader range of media they choose to incorporate into their artistic agendas. When an artist such as Shilpa Gupta deals with Indian identity, she does so with an acute awareness of a dialog with larger global artistic and cultural contexts. Indeed, many Indian artists possess an increasingly global perspective that anticipates a global audience. For Gupta, photography is one tool among many – she often produces groups of interrelated pieces in various media. In some works she uses web-based and interactive technology to take on international social issues by challenging her viewers to consider the moral implications of their actions. Works such as *Your Kidney Supermarket* and *Blessed-Bandwidth.net* forced participants to recognize global ramifications of global consumption and fundamentalist religious intolerance (Pijnappel 50–59). Through a complex, often purposefully ambivalent and at times ironic array of visual and interactive tactics, Gupta’s works address issues ranging from constructed gender identities to global consumerism, to terrorism (see figure 20). She may be Indian, but she tends to take a world view. For an artist such as Shilpa Gupta, being Indian within a global context is no longer a negotiation of cultures or a consideration of transplanted diasporic experience. Instead, Indianness is, at best, secondary to a larger global political engagement. To Gupta, national and cultural identities are in flux, they are temporal and ultimately dissolving. With Gupta’s requisite irony of making such a proclamation with police tape aside, a new conceptualization of the Indian abroad does indeed seem to be emerging when an Indian artist exclaims that “there are no borders here” (see figure 21).

Whatever their global view in analyzing an Indian presence within larger global contexts, the photographers addressed in this essay have made an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the diversity of contemporary photographic practice, as well as the complexities of cultural identity. The breadth of their approaches to the medium stresses the plasticity of photography as an analytical and expressive tool in and outside of India. And the eloquent conceptual and expressive depth of their investigations underscores the ever-shifting cultural spheres of differentiation that the Indian diaspora negotiates and, occasionally, negates.

Works cited

- Badsha, Omar. "Imperial Ghetto: People and Rituals in a South African Ghetto." *Social Identities* 6.4 (2000): 511–35.
- . Personal email correspondence with the author. 21 May 2008.
- Bartholomew, Pablo. *The Indians in America*. Unpublished artist's statement. Jan. 1994.
- . Personal email correspondence with the author. 5 Jan. 2007.
- deSouza, Allan. "Recovering Vision." *Allan deSouza: The Lost Pictures*. Claremont, CA: Pomona College Museum of Art, 2004. 11–14.
- Enwezor, Okwui. *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography*. New York and Göttingen: International Center of Photography and Steidl, 2006.
- Gill, Gauri. "The Americans." Unpublished artist's statement. 21 Feb. 2007.
- . *The Americans*. New Delhi: Nature Morte/Bose Pacia, 2008.
- Gupta, Sunil. *Exiles*. 19 May 2008 <<http://www.sunilgupta.net/Exiles/exilesfront.html>>.
- . *Pictures from Here*. London: Chris Boot, 2003.
- The Indian Diaspora*. 5 Oct. 2004. The Government of India, Non Resident Indians and Persons of Indian Origin Division, Ministry of External Affairs. 19 May 2008 <<http://indiandiaspora.nic.in/>>.
- Kadekar, Laxmi Narayan. *Global Indian Diaspora: An Overview*. Centre for the Study of Indian Diaspora, University of Hyderabad. 19 May 2008 <<http://csidss.googlepages.com/ocpapers.html>>.
- Kerouak, Jack. "Introduction." *The Americans*. Robert Frank. 1959. Zurich: Scalo, 2000.
- Mack, Joshua. "Allan deSouza: The Lost Pictures." *Modern Painters*. Sept. 2005:109.
- Matthew, Annu Palakunnathu. *An Indian from India*. 19 May 2008 <http://www.annumatthew.com/Portfolios/Indian/Indian_Statement.html>.
- . *Memories of India*. 19 May 2008 <<http://www.annumatthew.com/Portfolios/Memories%20of%20India/Memories.html#>>.
- Oishi, Eve. "Painting with an Eraser." *Allan deSouza: The Lost Pictures*. Claremont, CA: Pomona College Museum of Art, 2004. 4–9.
- Omar Badsha *Imperial Ghetto*. *South African History Online*. 19 May 2008 <<http://www.sahistory.org.za>>. Path: People; Fine Arts; Badsha; Omar Badsha's Web Site; Works; Imperial Ghetto; Artist's Statement.
- Pijnappel, Johan. "Interview with Shilpa Gupta." *Crossing Currents: Video Art and Cultural Identity*. New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 2006. 50–59.
- Sheth, Ketaki. Author's interview. 17 May 2007.
- . "Ketaki Sheth." *Photographers International* 35 (1997): 74–75.
- . *Twinspotting: Photographs of Patel Twins in Britain and India*. Stockport: Dewi Lewis, 1999.
- "Sunil Gupta : Love & Light." *POZ*. December 2004.

Paul Sternberger gained his PhD from Columbia University and is an Associate Professor of Art History at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey, USA. His publications include *By its Cover: Modern American Book Cover Design* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2005) and *Between Amateur and Aesthete: The Legitimization of Photography in America, 1880–1900* (University of New Mexico Press, 2001). He recently co-curated the "India: Public Places, Private Spaces – Contemporary Photography and Video Art" exhibition which appeared at the Newark Museum, Newark, New Jersey in 2007–08 and at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, Minnesota in 2008–09. The

corresponding catalog was published by Marg Publications. Sternberger's articles and reviews have appeared in journals such as *History of Photography*, *American Art* and the *Journal of the History of Collections*.
