English Translation –

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MASKED ”Who does our face belong to – ourselves or the world that watches us?" Indian photographer Gauri Gill on representation, identity and the freedom to break with it all.

Owning your papier-mâché mask

DELHI, INDIA – In the middle of Lala Lajpat Rai Road, the rickshaw driver and I are stuck. The traffic stops and all I can make out is the smooth surface of the cars in the heavy, hazy pollution of the city. Almost as if it were a cheeky remark from the artist I'm about to meet. Photographer Gauri Gill criticizes the migration of people to the metropolises in her work.

I'm about to get off the rickshaw, but my driver waves his hand: "Five minutes," he reassures me. The knot of rickshaws loosens after 15 minutes, and finally I'm standing at a townhouse with Gauri Gill's name on the door.

A slender woman in slippers opens and hands me a massive book without a word.

She must be Gauri Gill's housekeeper. The busy photographer has agreed to meet in Delhi, but before our interview she has sent me to her address to pick up a book. I've simply got homework too. In the rickshaw on the way back, I leaf through the thick volume, which consists of Gill's photo series over 20 years.

Gauri Gill has been described by The New York Times as "one of India's most respected photographers" and in the Indian press as "one of the most thoughtful" in the industry.

Her work has hung in MoMa in New York, Documenta in Kassel, Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, and now Louisiana in Humlebæk is also exhibiting Gauri Gill's photographs. From the end of January, the museum north of Copenhagen will be showing the works, described in the press material as a "dichotomy between centre and periphery, between the modern capitalism of the metropolis and the deeper roots of Indian culture".

One series of images in particular has got the world talking about Gauri Gill. The Acts of Appearance series is photographed in remote villages in western India, where local communities are cut off from the outside world and modern amenities like running water. The villages do not share in India's economic boom, but are slowly withering, decaying.

The locals in the photographs are dressed in papier-mâché masks as they pose in typical everyday situations. Sweeping with a jhadu, a broom made of stiff bamboo branches, or preparing the evening meal on the sandy soil. Two women in pale yellow saris pull water from a well wearing the powder-white papier-mâché masks.

Gill's photographs are strange and moving. You get a strange sense that the people portrayed are looking back at you defiantly. Blunt, straightforward. Maybe they're saying: "Ha! You were about to feel sorry for me, but you don't really know how I feel. Do you?"

In addition to the book, Gauri Gill has sent me a link to a video, in which she reflects on her work in the dusty countryside. She talks about representation. About giving villagers a voice, a face. Gill is used to telling the stories, I sense. Is she troubled by the fact that someone else is now leading the pen - and shaping the text? Is that why she gave me a syllabus before the interview?

GAURI GILL LAUGHS when we meet two weeks later at a café in south Delhi: "Well, I'm here. I've just been trying to negotiate my terms," she says, referring to the book, the video and the demand to have her quotes checked. "But you're the one with the power in this situation. It's your story."

How do you feel about that, I ask.

She hesitates for a moment:
"Through my practice, I have felt a great responsibility for the people I portray. I have felt the weight of that responsibility, and for me representation is still a big, open question. Can you reproduce another person's life? I can barely portray myself credibly."

Gauri Gill sits with her upper body leaning over the table, as if to make sure her points cut through the café dust. The 53-year-old photographer has a youthful air. Her hair is tousled and she speaks animatedly, in long, telling sentences.

Behind the glass window, Delhi's impossible traffic glides by, almost making the noisy café feel like a tranquil oasis.

Gauri Gill is at home in the bustle of Indian metropolises, having grown up in North Indian cities. The family moved around for her father's job, and although her grandparents came from small towns, Gill didn't really know life outside the glaringly bright cities.

It wasn't until she joined an Indian news magazine as an adult and was sent out as a photojournalist that she began documenting everyday life in poor rural areas. There was suffering, there were entrenched hierarchies; class, caste, gender. There were neglected women. And there were the men who headed for the metropolises, leaving the villages thinned out, Gill explains.

The news magazine had its weekly rhythm; reporters and photographers were sent out on Mondays, were back on Thursdays, so the story was ready on Fridays. One week they did a story about a farmer who had committed suicide because the harvest failed and the money wasn't enough. They visited his home, his village, talked to the locals.

"But we never went back and found out how the story unfolded. How did the suicide affect the village a year later? I had a strong feeling that we never fully understood what was going on – and a terrible urge to dig deeper, to understand reality and the people who lived in it," she says.

An incident in a village in Rajasthan made the repetitive news cycle seem unbearable. It was winter, and the children of the village were being taught on the roof of the school building. The teacher had a stick in his hand with which he suddenly began to beat a little girl.

Gauri Gill witnessed the incident, which was so brutal that she suggested to her editor that she do a photo essay from the village. She wanted to document life as a girl in conservative Rajasthan. The editor refused, he needed a news hook, and Gauri Gill took leave, travelled out on her own.

She set up a photo studio in a desert village, and girls and women came in to have their portraits taken. "I've had a picture taken, and every time people see it, they want to think of me," one of the girls is quoted as saying in what later became the portrait series Balika Mela.

The studio was a way to make the women of the village visible, explains Gill, who began experimenting with the interaction between herself, the camera and the photographed. She did not direct the locals, but let them pose as they wished. Hand in hand, alone, with a newspaper, on a motorbike, carrying a suitcase.

ANYWHERE IN THE THICK BOOK of Gill's work, it is described that she uses her time in the villages to break down the distance between herself and the local people. It makes me think of her famous series of photos of the papier-mâché masks. Why photograph the locals dressed in masks, I ask. Doesn't it create the opposite, a distance?

"The masks change the conditions," Gill replies. "I'm very conscious of the power I have when I come with my camera. And I'm constantly trying to challenge or change that position. In the series with the masks, the

subjects take back the power. They take ownership of their faces. Nobody knows what's going on behind the façade. Whether they're sticking their tongues out, smiling, crying, sleeping."

Local artists created the masks, which are inspired by the local Bohada festival.

"The festival models are very spectacular," Gill says, illustrating the over-drawn facial features with her hands. "They depict gods with gold and glitter. I wondered why there are no masks of ordinary people."

Gill heard about a famous mask artist, Dharma Kadu, whose sons continued the tradition of making the masks for the festival.

"I asked if they could make masks that, instead of depicting the divine, could illustrate the ordinary. The familiar faces - the neighbour's face - ordinary life experiences, emotions and everyday events. They said, 'We can do anything, but can you give us a sample?' I said, 'There is no sample. They don't even exist in my head!'"

The local artists ended up painting the masks based on the nine emotions or rasa – from traditional Indian acting: love, humour, sadness, anger, enthusiasm, fear, contempt, amazement and liberation.

Gauri Gill gathered about 40 people from the surrounding villages to create the photographs. She paid them as if they were ordinary actors. The village formed the backdrop to the photographs; schools, hospitals, bus stops, kiosks, vegetable markets. There was no script, everything was improvised. One might say: "Now I'm a teacher!" and sit behind the desk.

"The whole idea was to play with identity and social roles. In India, especially in rural communities, people are locked into a social identity. Are you a mother or the eldest son? Are you from a high caste or a low caste? I wanted to experiment with those identities and show that no one is reduced to one role."

Gill's photographs also contain political commentary: one photograph shows a long queue to the bank and is from the time the Modi government abolished the 2,000 rupee note to fight corruption in the country. The move proved to be hard on the lowest paid, who earned their money from day to day, and the government had to reintroduce the note. Another photograph shows a man weighing onions on a scale and is a reference to a period when onions became hugely expensive due to drought. The photograph of the women in yellow saris at the well is a reference to the major water crisis in India, which is rooted in climate change and is once again taking its toll on rural populations.

But doesn't Gill challenge the documentary genre by staging her photographs so strikingly?

"It's obvious to everyone that the masks are staged. But I haven't tampered with the costumes. When we no longer see the face, our focus moves to other places in the picture. We suddenly become more aware of our surroundings," says Gill.

"My aim has always been to show everyday life outside the powerful metropolises; to show ordinary situations. The men are playing cards, the women are sweeping the floor, and yes, they're wearing masks, but it still tells us something about gender roles in those places."

I tell Gauri Gill about my impression that the people in the photographs are looking back at you with a coy expression, almost as if you are being confronted with your prejudices about life in a poor Indian village.

"It was very important to me that the photographs should not
arouse pity. I wanted to show the strength of the locals, that they manage to stay afloat despite harsh conditions. And at the same time to poke at the audience's perceptions, so it's quite deliberate," Gill smiles and continues:

"You can even think of the face as a kind of mask. Who does our face belong to - ourselves or the world watching us?

"Throughout our conversation, you've been looking at me and my face, and I've been looking at you and your face. In this way, I have interpreted more from your face than from my own."

At the café tables around us, people slowly begin to stand up, take their jackets off the backs of their chairs and put on their anti-pollution masks. Three large mirrors hang along one wall. In one of them I can see my own face; I have a serious expression and flushing cheeks.

In reality, Gill doesn't stage, she says. She gives people the freedom to stage themselves - or set their own scene.

GAURI GILL (born 1970) lives in New Delhi, India. She graduated in photography from Parsons School of Design and Stanford University in the United States. For five years she worked as a photojournalist for Indian news media before she quit her job in 1999 to document life in rural India.