

## SUNIL GUPTA

Tausif Noor, *Sunil Gupta Saturates his Photographs with Love and Sex*, Frieze, 4 January 2023



Sunil Gupta, *Untitled #22* from the series 'Christopher Street, New York 1976', 1976

*Sunil Gupta's work as a photographer, curator, organizer and educator traces the global arc of queer diaspora. Born in Delhi in 1953, he immigrated to Montreal as a teenager, and then studied photography in New York in the 1970s, capturing gay life in animated black-and-white images. He later trained at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London and became involved with minority and queer activism, all of which informed the evocative, sympathetic images of Delhi's gay men that he would construct in the 1980s, as well as the exhibitions he would go on to organize that sensitively portrayed those living with HIV/AIDS. Gupta's photography has been collected in several volumes, most recently *From Here to Eternity* (Autograph, 2020) and *Lovers: Ten Years On* (2020), while a selection of his writing from the 1980s onward has been recently published by Aperture. Over video*

*chat in November, Gupta and I discussed his experiences of queer migration, and how love and sex have driven his photographic practice.*

**Tausif Noor:** Over the past few years, you've been subject to the retrospective treatment, with several important volumes of your photographs published as monographs, a major survey exhibition at The Photographers' Gallery in London in 2020 and, most recently, an edited volume of your writing, *We Were Here: Sexuality, Photography, and Cultural Difference*, published by Aperture this autumn. What is your relationship to your own archive?

**Sunil Gupta:** Since I turned 69 this year, the documentation of my work has improved enormously. In my practice, I have tended to focus on the present moment, but my archive is

a source of rich material and, the more readily I'm able to access it, the more clearly I can see several things that could be brought into some kind of shape, that describe a similar time, but with a slightly different point of view – sometimes using photographs and texts together, sometimes not.

My training occurred during a modernist period in New York, when the image was sacrosanct: full-frame, single print. I've relaxed a lot about that over the years, but I think the thing that most impacted me was the 'New Documents' photography show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1967, with Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand. Arbus was taught by my teacher, Lisette Model, who often spoke about her in the first person, and Winogrand continuously shot the streets – so I did the same. I suddenly found myself in a photography world where the subject, the making and the consumption could all be found within a few blocks of each other in New York. That was my work for a year and it was transformative. I was enrolled in an MBA programme but I never went – though my parents were still paying, so some fiction had to be maintained for the payments to continue. By the time they discovered I hadn't been going, the year was over, and I had made up my mind to become a photographer.

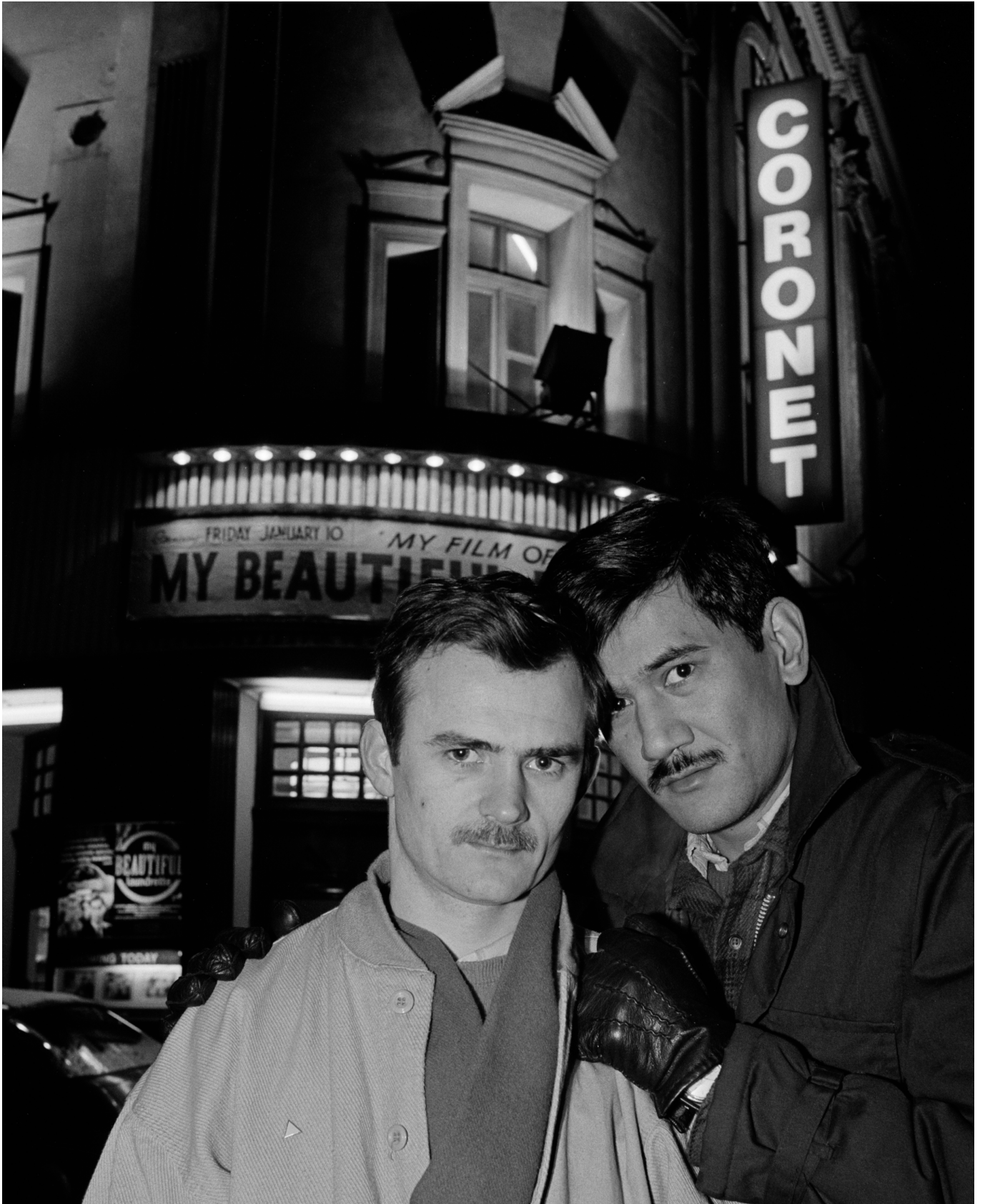
I've got an overstuffed closet full of archival material. Not all of it is negatives – a lot of it is ephemera, like ticket stubs, programmes and other people's catalogues. Things were low budget and much of it was photocopied so it was easy to store; equally, it was often also the only evidence you had that the show ever happened. For my retrospective at The Photographers' Gallery, we decided not to have a catalogue of the work in the show. Instead, we published *From Here to Eternity* (2020), a book full of ephemera, which provides context for the making of the work: postcards for the openings, little reviews, commissioning letters and rejection letters, the boyfriends and the non-boyfriends, the casual sex. I realized that I couldn't separate

the living from the artmaking.

**TN:** The new volume of your selected writings follows your career in artmaking and activism chronologically. From your work in London with the Greater London Council (GLC) during the 1980s, we understand how you and your peers had to insist upon your presence, and the same goes for the work that you would do when you found out about your seropositivity in the 1990s. Were you aware at the time that you were making history or creating institutions with your comrades?

**SG:** Things were happening quite rapidly, and it started early in my art career. When I left the RCA in 1983, we had a Black students graduation show that was separate to the main graduation show. Someone invited the GLC, which is how we met other like-minded people and, from there, my trajectory shifted, quite dramatically, away from the commercial art world. A couple of art-world figures had come by and said they liked the pictures and wanted to do something with them, but we wanted to work on policymaking and learn about real politics, outside academia and the art world. It was a lot of work, and I was intensely busy: I spent most nights at meetings, or with various voluntary policymaking groups focused on race or gender representation or culture. Sometimes, we'd have to stay up all night writing grant applications. The odd thing was that there was a schism between the political meetings early in the evening and the bar culture at night, which was often super white and not political. Nobody wanted to recognize you for what you were. I would sometimes walk up to guys who I thought were ethnically South Asian and make the terrible mistake of asking them where they were from, trying to have a conversation about origins, and they would say: 'I'm from Cardiff and you can fuck off.' The art history I'd been taught for five years during my full-time schooling in the UK was Eurocentric and heterosexual: if photographers like Robert Mapplethorpe were mentioned, it was entirely





Sunil Gupta, *Gay*, 1986

cloak-and-dagger, so it became a project of mine to raise those issues. To put it crudely, the gay scene seemed very white and in need of some race-awareness training. Then there was the question of the extreme homophobia in the Black and Brown worlds – especially in South Asia. Almost every South Asian I met lived at home, which really limited their ability to come to meetings and develop consciousness.

**TN:** That sense of urgency, or the immediacy of the work which has to be done, is palpable across your writings, and I think there's also a sense of immediacy to your photographs, whether straight-shot or composed. You said that you can't separate activism from the making of your work. How do you relate questions of style to questions of politics?

**SG:** I started out in a documentary way, using the camera to represent the politics: I went out to shoot demonstrations and actions and the work being done in voluntary groups. I made a documentary about the London Gay Switchboard, which was the largest LGBTQ+ voluntary group at the time. I was focusing very much on Black or queer activism and trying to document that same thing when AIDS struck, eventually working with Black and Asian HIV patients. I discovered that many people who were affected didn't want to be in front of the camera, leading to the natural conclusion that a documentary approach was not going to work. I very much liked the transparency and ease with which the audience could engage with documentary, but the subjects were not interested in being publicized and outed in that way, so I had to shift gears and move toward a more directed style.

In 1986, I made the series 'Exiles', about cruising in Delhi. Through pre-arranged informants, we went to specific places to make specific kinds of pictures of gay men in Delhi. They struck poses, and I wanted the results to look documentary: some people are annoyed when they discover the

images aren't. Ethically, however, it just wouldn't have been right, given that we were in Delhi and people were not out at the time. A lot of these meetings would happen in parks, so I suppose I could have waited for them to start jerking off and jump out with my flash to take a snap, but that seemed grossly unfair. I smart whenever I see work shot like this.

I grew up in Delhi, and my childhood was entirely rooted in cinema, because we had no art galleries in those years – or, at least, my parents weren't the kind of people who went to galleries. I grew up with Bollywood: big screens, big melodrama, high camp. I think Indian gay boys recognize when they see Meena Kumari in a film like *Pakeezah* (The Pure One, 1972) that she's speaking for them. I didn't have to grow up and come to the West to understand queer culture. We had our own sensibilities of over-the-top colour, drama and camp.

**TN:** A heightened sensitivity to the contexts that you've had to move through – from growing up in India to a peripatetic life spent moving around Montreal, New York and London – is reflected in the possibility of playing up or toning different aspects of your identity, all of which exist simultaneously within you as a photographer. How has that awareness allowed you to think about the trajectory of your many 'queer migrations', as you phrase it in the book?

**SG:** Throughout the 1990s, I was living in a lefty, mixed-race bubble in south London, and we did think that we were a kind of vanguard. We were sure that this was the right way to go. Almost everybody I knew, whether straight or gay, had a partner of another race; it was part of the ethos. On the public side, a lot of time was spent engaging with the Arts Council and the GLC, writing diversity documents and arguing that the UK's non-white population, which was then around four percent, needed to have greater cultural funding. And we saw the impact across arts organizations, galleries and museums. When



we started, there was a hopeful confidence that we had set in motion change that was right around the corner. It was in that spirit that the Institute of International Visual Arts was launched in 1994. But we were overshadowed by the Young British Artists, who were all white and sought after by commercial galleries.

In 2003, when I turned 50, I looked around and saw that what had been my lifelong project was no more. It had no funding; people had become embittered. Many people had died through frustration, poverty or AIDS. It became a war of attrition. In the 1990s, everything was publicly funded, and we hadn't stopped to think about money so, when the funding ended, many of us were left high and dry. It really affected me: there was a point at which I was receiving state benefits and living in social housing. I was HIV positive. I thought nobody would have sex with me, which was very bad for my promiscuity and my gay-liberation politics. I decided to go back to India. I had a 50th birthday party in London, invited a lot of people and more or less told them: 'You're all racist, so I'm leaving.' Really, it was because I'd met this Indian guy at an exhibition and decided to follow him back to Delhi – rather foolishly, as it turned out, because, when I arrived, the guy had completely lost interest in me! The problem was that I'd made such a big song and dance publicly about leaving the UK that I couldn't just turn around and come back. So, I ended up staying in Delhi for the next seven years.

TN: The increased globalization or 'new internationalism' of the art world during the early 2000s implied, for some people, that questions of race could be put aside. But, drawing on the work of figures like Rasheed Araeen and Stuart Hall, you insisted that race was still an important concept that needed to be thought through critically. You approach these questions in different capacities – as an artist, curator, organizer and writer – but your focus remains the same, even when the context or the

geographical location changes.

SG: Photography and homosexuality, my twin pillars of wisdom, have always been my concerns but they take on different meanings in different contexts. They are continuously evolving. I arrived back in India in 2003, in the midst of the initial struggle to overturn Section 377, which outlawed sodomy. There was a lot of social activism around that.

In India, the galleries were still focused on painting and sculpture, very much about unique objects, which is what they sold. When I approached galleries initially about doing a survey on contemporary photography in India, they were very supportive until I told them how much it would cost for the research. I discovered there was no systematic way in India to get research grants to explore this rich history of photography, that nobody had looked at it because there were no comprehensive publications. So, we did that research and then they said: 'We'd like to sell some pictures.' That entered the equation of the selections, and then they began to represent me, and they became very supportive.



Sunil Gupta, *Bikram, India Gate, 2007*

That was a very positive change that happened right in front of my eyes: I had a bizarre experience of going to India in the 1980s, when you couldn't even mention the word 'gay', to being there in 2010 when so many people had come out as queer. Since then, the LGBTQ+ community has benefitted from two and a half generations of queer workshopping.

like I've suddenly landed on my feet. Now my archives are being produced and, after being in India with no government funding, I've been pulled back into the commercial world, which is now responding. I'm in a happy place – things could have gone very differently.

**TN:** I wanted to touch on one last thing, which is the fact that so much of your work and your journeys and migrations are motivated by love and sex. You've moved countries in pursuit of one or the other, or both. Love and sex are essential to the work both in terms of production, but also in its interpretation.

**SG:** In 2009, I had a solo show at Delhi's Vadehra Art Gallery called 'Love, Undetectable'. By that point, I had come to a conclusion. During those years of 377 activism, I went to all these meetings about sociology and the awful law. It seemed like so much was being reduced to this law and nobody wanted to touch on emotion and love, so I began to make a series of pictures of my girlfriends who are in relationships, in Delhi and Bombay. At the time, I'd met a new guy, and we decided we were going to date and had a kind of honeymoon where we took the camera to bed. There's a series of colour pictures of us, very intimate and large print, having sex. I'm telling you this story because this was in 2009 and the gallery put up all the images and didn't bat an eyelid, and people came and saw the show.

Love became entwined in the story, and then there was the question of how to get him to Canada. The only way was for us to get married, and the only option for gay marriage at the time was in Canada – not in the UK, not in India. I got the art world involved: I asked the Art Gallery of Ontario to invite him as I was a juror for the Grange Prize. My gallery in Toronto, Stephen Bulger, arranged the legalities and we got married. And now we're both together in London. After 50 years of uncertainty, I feel