

## **Grant Report: Humanities/humanity Project**

### **South Asian Photographs Across the Disciplines: The Uses of Visual Evidence**

#### **A Seminar Series for Spring 2015**

#### **A Humanities/Humanity Project of the Whitney Humanities Center at Yale**

**Faculty Organizers:** Professors Laura Wexler (American Studies/WGSS), Kishwar Rizvi (Art History/South Asian Studies), Tamara Sears (Art History/South Asian Studies) and Inderpal Grewal (WGSS/South Asian Studies)

**Co-Sponsored by:** WGSS, Art History, South Asian Studies Council, LGBT Studies, Photographic Memory Workshop, sepiaEYE Gallery, New York.

**Project website:** <http://campuspress.yale.edu/southasianphoto2015/about-the-series/>

#### **Project summary:**

Over the past two decades, the study of the history of photography in South Asia has gained increasing traction in many disciplines and fields across the humanities. Thanks to the work of many pioneering scholars, South Asian photography and photographic practices are now considered to be a vibrant field of interdisciplinary scholarship and research. Photographs pertaining to South Asia are part of several collections at Yale, and are as varied as their locations. Within the broader context of colonialism and modernity, the South Asia material at the Yale helps situate South Asia within a global context. Alongside their art historical significance in the context of photography in South Asia, the collections are important resources for the study of the cultural and political history of the region.

This seminar series focused on four different disciplinary and interdisciplinary conversations that take as a starting point Yale's collections of South Asia photographs. Our goal was to bring together many pioneering scholars to assist us in developing critical methods for researching and circulating the Yale collections.

For each session, we combined panel discussions with prominent scholars in the field of South Asian Photography research across disciplines (art history, art practice, history, anthropology, visual culture). Each seminar included showcasing and discussing Yale collections at the Beinecke, and at the Yale University Art Gallery. In addition, we incorporated an exhibition of photographs by the artist Sunil Gupta, beginning with an opening reception. The exhibition continued through the spring semester in the WHC.

**Participation:** While the Opening reception was open to the public, any students, scholars or researchers wishing to join the seminars were invited to sign up to participate. We encouraged broad participation across disciplines. For each session and for the Opening reception, we had excellent participation. Scholars, artists, art historians, historians of South Asia, students from across the Northeast joined us for these seminars. We had participation from Wesleyan, Mt Holyoke, Smith College, Swarthmore, among other institutions. Approximately 20-30 people participated in each seminar.

### **Opening Reception**

We commenced the four seminar series with an exciting double bill convened by Laura Wexler and co-sponsored by the Photographic Memory Workshop: the opening of an exhibition by photographer Sunil Gupta at the Whitney Humanities Center, including a gallery talk by the artist, and a panel of scholars and curators in discussion about critical themes in contemporary South Asian photographic production. The photographic exhibition, entitled “Queer Migrations: Family, Identity, and Place: Photographs by Sunil Gupta” comprised two sets of photographs. The first was a set of diptychs representing cultural displacements, diasporic locations and relocations of the photographer’s life occasioned by his queer identity and activism. The second was a series of portraits of gay, lesbian, queer and trans South Asians who allowed themselves to be photographed under the umbrella description of “Mr. Malhotra’s Party,” a local vernacular

term for the social gathering of LGBT people, still criminalized, in India. In his gallery talk on the evening of February 5, 2015, Gupta, who has a long and distinguished career as an artist and teacher, emphasized that the space of exhibition and now of the web is an opportunity for “an imaginary and more open party.” A document was also produced to accompany Gupta’s Yale exhibition, which included both a gallery list of the photographs exhibited and a set of brief explanatory texts and quotations by the artist.

## **Seminar Descriptions**

### **Seminar 1**

Title: Contemporary Photographic Practices in South Asia

Date & Time: February 6, 2015 | 12 – 2 pm

Location: Whitney Humanities Center, Room 108

Session Leader: Laura Wexler

Panelists: Deepali Dewan (Royal Ontario Museum), Sandra Matthews (Hampshire College), Esa Epstein (sepiaEye, NYC) and Sunil Gupta

The panel the following day brought scholars, gallerists and curators together with Sunil Gupta, for a wide ranging discussion of the places, interventions and opportunities for South Asian photographers working today

Additional discussion of the seminar series in general and the work of Sunil Gupta specifically was provided by Sunil Gupta, Laura Wexler and Inderpal Grewal in a live radio interview by Matt Reiniger on Arts Radio, WPKN, on Monday, February 16, 2015.

### **Seminar 2**

Title: The Art of Documentation

Date & Time: February 27, 2015 | 12 – 2 pm

Location: Loria 351

Date & Time: February 27, 2015 | 2:30-4 pm

Location: Yale University Art Gallery

Session Leader: Kishwar Rizvi

Panelists: Iftikhar Dadi (Cornell University), Beth Citron (Rubin Museum, NYC)

This second session was built around the photographs in the Yale University Art Gallery and included a panel with two speakers who have long researched the relation between art and photography in South Asia. Iftikhar Dadi's research on situating the emerging of art practices in the South Asian context within aesthetic and politics of the subcontinent revealed the impact of new markets, artists and technologies. Beth Citron, a curator and art historian based at the Rubin Museum in New York shared her ongoing research on the history of photography in South Asia. The seminar was followed by a visit to YUAG, where we were able to view the work of some important photographers from and about South Asia. This was an exciting moment to enjoy these works that are not usually on display. Seminar participants who were not Yale faculty or students found these to be especially interesting since there are few opportunities to view these particular photographs.

### **Seminar 3**

Title: Architecture and Built Environments

Date, Time & Location: April 10, 2015 | 12 – 2 pm Room 108, Whitney Humanities Center | 2:30 – 4 pm Rooms 38-39, Beinecke Library

Session Leader: Tamara Sears

Panelists: Crispin Branfoot (SOAS), Rebecca Brown (Johns Hopkins University), Ajay Sinha (Mt. Holyoke College)

The third session of the series, Architecture and Built Environments, turned to photographs that engaged architecture as both subject and object of visual inquiry. The formal lecture portion of the program featured three speakers, Crispin Branfoot (School of Oriental and African Studies, London), Rebecca Brown (Johns Hopkins), and Ajay Sinha (Mt. Holyoke). Crispin's talk focused on the work that he had recently done in conjunction with an exhibition featuring the

work of British photographer Captain Linnaeus Tripe (1822-1902), who documented his stay in India and Burma through an extensive series of images produced between 1852 and 1860. In addition to describing his own involvement in the exhibition, which was currently at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, he talked in detail about Tripe's position within a broader history of photography in Southern Asia and about the close relationship between colonial photography and the production of knowledge. The second speaker, Rebecca Brown, turned to the uses of photographs of architecture and built environments within post-colonial museum contexts in relationship to her current research on the 1985-86 Festival of India. In addition to addressing the use of photography to contextualize Indian art and cultural artifacts, she demonstrated that the photographs themselves were often fabricated, and manipulated, to produce particular effects specific to the exhibition space. The third speaker, Ajay Sinha, brought our discussion even further into the present by addressing the photograph of Ragubhir Singh, taking particularly about a number of photographs in the Yale Art Gallery collections. His paper engaged the ways in which photography has served to defamiliarize spaces and to capture the dissonance between expectations and reality in a globalizing world. The talks were well attended, and the discussion that followed generated many questions that are worth pursuing in future venues.

The second part of the program, the informal archival session, was held in a large study room at Beinecke. There we looked at a selection of photographs from four of Yale's special collections: (1) the Robert Byron papers, (2) the Marjorie Content Papers and Photographs, (3) the Frank Kellogg Smith Travel Photographs and Memorabilia, and (4) the Sara and Gerald Murphy papers. Whereas the Byron, Smith, and Murphy collections contained a wide range of photographs and postcards of monuments, some of which were professionally made, the Content collection

provided a cohesive picture of an extended trip to India undertaken as part of a round-the-world journey in 1939. Of the four collections, this one showed exceptional promise for future research and collaborative projects. Not only was Marjorie Content clearly an exceptionally talented photographer, but the collection itself is extremely well cataloged and recorded. In all, the archival portion of the day's program was as richly attended and invigorating as the lunchtime formal lectures, and it certainly fulfilled, beyond our expectations, the potential of such funded series to facilitate new discoveries in Yale's special collections.

#### *Seminar 4*

Title: Mobility and Method: Visual Cultures of Ethnography and Travel

Date: May 8, 2015

Location & Time: 12 – 2 pm The Gordon Parks Seminar Room, Room 201, 81 Wall St. | 2:30 – 4 pm Room 38, Beinecke Library

Session Leader: Inderpal Grewal

Panelists: Christopher Pinney (University College, London), Karen Nakamura (Yale University), Zahid Chaudhary (Princeton University)

This last seminar combined talks by Karen Nakamura, a Yale anthropologist who incorporates photography into her research on disability in Japan, Christopher Pinney, from the University of London, who is the foremost anthropologist-history of photography in India, and Zahid Chaudhary from Princeton, a literary and visual studies scholar whose research examines the photography in South Asia as a colonial idiom. These were three very different perspectives that showed how disciplinary differences, and different approaches to photography as method, as topic and as a form of power. The audience found these different approaches to be provocatively brought together, and the papers elicited many questions from the audience. It was a generative seminar, which could easily have gone on for a longer time.

The seminar was followed by an informal archival session that involved a visit to the Beinecke, where the group looked at the holdings – including some that reflected many of the issues raised

by the speakers. One collection in particular was the set of slides taken by Magnum photographer, Eve Arnold, who went to India to photograph Indira Gandhi's 1978 election. We had not known about this collection until graduate student, Mohit Manohar unearthed these a summer project funded by the South Asia Program. This set of photographs were of great interest both to historians and those interested in election politics in India.

### **Follow up Projects;**

1) We have been very successful in showcasing the Yale photography holdings to the many participants of these four seminars. In particular, the holdings in the Beinecke were unknown to many of us and finding these and sharing the information with interested scholars was most important. We hope that we can continue to build the website (funding permitting) so that the images can be available to many others. Historians, scholars of travel, of colonialism and empire, American interest in South Asia – all these are potential researchers who can benefit from viewing and knowing about Yale holdings.

2) A second result is the stated interest by the *Trans Asia Photography Review* in publishing a special issue or portfolio of the best papers of the entire four seminar proceedings. We will be following up on this project in the near future.

### **Some responses from Organizers and Visitors:**

- From Tamara Sears, Assistant Professor, Art History, one of our organizers: “I wanted to also add my voice to thank all of you for including me in this project - I learned a tremendous amount through our collaborations and conversations. Yesterday's event in particular was a great way for me to end my year at Yale. ... I wanted to also mention that our collaboration led me to run a session of my graduate seminar (on Mobility, Travel, and Transmissions of Visual Knowledge) around the Marjorie Content collection, and we had a really excellent session. We gleaned much new insight concerning the temporality of Content's travels by charting the varying density of her

photographs in relationship to place and the ways in which expectations may have shaped the kinds of photographs that were shot in different parts of the subcontinent. One of the more useful exercises we did was to use online tools to literally map her journey using the collection as a guide. I would like to write up an article on the collection, and to further reflect on the utility of using modern mapping technology in conjunction with photography.”

- From Kishwar Rizvi, Associate Professor, Art History, another organizer: “It really has been a resounding success - fantastic speakers, stimulating discussions, and a new model (at least for me) to think of lectures and workshops. I really enjoyed the combination of listening to talks and then looking at primary material. A time commitment for sure, but an extremely rewarding one. Thank you everyone for your good humor, generosity, and openness to entertain diverse voices, methods, and disciplines. I'm excited to think about what comes next.”

- From one of our seminar speakers, Rebecca Brown, Associate Professor, History of Art Chair, Advanced Academic Program in Museum Studies  
Editor-in-Chief, *Art Journal*  
Johns Hopkins University

“Thanks so much for such a rich and rewarding conversation both evenings and throughout the day on Friday. Wonderful papers, great questions, fascinating archival material. I only wish I was able to be there for the whole series! Thanks also for the provocation to think through questions of photography and architecture. Looking forward to future conversations.”

**Finally, we'd like to thank the Whitney Humanities Center, especially Director Gary Tomlinson, for the grant, and for including this project in the Humanities/Humanity series. A special mention goes to our WHC colleagues, especially Mark Bauer, for enabling the Sunil Gupta exhibition. Without Mark's support, work and interventions, this could not have happened. We thank Esa Epstein and sepieEYE Gallery for the loan of the Sunil Gupta photographs. We are also so appreciative of the Beinecke Library's support and hosting of our archive displays; in particular, we thank George Miles, who hosted us for two events, one on the last day that the Beinecke was open before shutting down for renovations for the year!. We also thank the South Asia Program, especially Kasturi Gupta, for staff support that took care of travel and logistics and the excellent website. The South**

**Asia program also supported two summers of research that enabled us to document and find the Beinecke holdings and other South Asia photographs at Yale ; the grants supported the work of Art History graduate students Shabnam Rahimi-Golkhandam and Mohit Manohar who did the research.**

**We also thank the Photographic Memory Workshop, the Art History department and WGSS for their support.**

The organizers:  
Inderpal Grewal, WGSS  
Laura Wexler, WGSS/American Studies  
Tamara Sears, Art History  
Kishwar Rizvi, Art History.