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Leeming, William

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Crumbling on a Grander Scale: Sunil Gupta's *Homelands* (2001 – 2003)

Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa

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review by Bill Leeming

Sunil Gupta's photographic series *Homelands* clearly marks a significant turning point in a twenty-year struggle to come to terms with the cultural landscape of the AIDS crisis. With *Homelands*, Gupta sets out to portray a landscape in which the HIV virus has been travelling. A section of an Indian mural of bodybuilders is paired with a snapshot of a Dairy Queen in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. Graphics of religious deities, Bollywood characters and other cultural icons from India are juxtaposed with urban scenes from London, Montreal and New York — cities the artist has called home. The forts, temples, and gardens of Rajasthan, Uttar

Pradesh and Delhi sit side by side with photographs of the artist at home, naked, in New York. The choice of image pairings appears at once whimsical, self-effacing and acquiescent. What keeps the visitor locked in place, looking, is not the literalism of landscapes but Gupta's statement: "As [an HIV] carrier my presence in the landscape is ambivalent."

The nineteenth century German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies¹ once described the idea of homeland as "the embodiment of dear memories, holds the heart of man, who parts from it with sorrow and looks back to it with homesickness and

longing from abroad." This corresponds to a feeling that each place Gupta has photographed, as Edward Relph² might say, has "endured and will persist as a distinctive entity even though the world around may change." But, although Gupta comes into contact with those who inhabit these places, he is not organically connected to them through established ties of kinship or locality. Gupta's travels better recall Tönnies' contemporary, Georg Simmel,³ and his essay on adventure as a feature of modern life. For Simmel the perfect adventure is one in which "we abandon ourselves to the world." At the same time, modernity provides us with a world ready



Sunil Gupta, *Ajmer, Rajasthan/Great Yarmouth, Nova Scotia*, 2001-2003. Courtesy: the artist.

to accommodate, a tamed and domesticated world in which, as Zygmunt Bauman⁴ would add, “shocks come in a package deal with safety.”

Gupta’s cultural landscape of the AIDS crisis is a landscape punctuated by a number of separate, more or less isolated “timeless” forms and spaces. The ravages of time do not exist here. Time does not ravage; time does nothing but pass. The spaces themselves appear empty of time, slowed down, lacking movement or speed of movement. The ongoing restorations and preservation of India Gate, Humayun’s Tomb and the Lucknow appear to promise to restore the world around us to something like of former glory. We might be inspired to build a new future on a monumental past. Ruins, in this context, provide the incentive for remembering and a return to origins *à la* Tönnies and Relph. The redemption of what has been neglected can be as joyous as the creation of something new. In the cultural landscape of the AIDS crisis we

know all too well when the golden age was, i.e., “before the war.” So it makes every bit of sense to juxtapose photographic images of famous ruins from the past with more contemporary ruins like, say, the *Mineshaft* in New York or Gupta’s Montreal “home.” We are living in an interval of neglect.

Gupta’s earliest photographs of the mid-1970s on Christopher Street in New York are, he says in retrospect, prophetic: “made just before the AIDS crisis they have taken on a new historical significance.” Noting that the Christopher Street of the period had “attained the mythical status by then of the birthplace of gay liberation,” the subjects of the photographs are somber and pensive. They seem to be looking — or waiting — for something. Admittedly, one could scarcely accuse the cityscape of New York of ever lacking movement. But the isolated, domineering sense of what surrounds the subjects in these pictures is heavy with time. There is a sense of leaving the routine and constancy of everyday life

and replacing it with something fugitive and ephemeral. In a similar way, there is a chary, unwelcoming quality to Gupta’s portraits of gay couples in the 1980s in their West London homes — a “social circle...to be hard hit by AIDS.” Amid the domesticity of the kitchens, living rooms and bedrooms they have created, these couples are on guard — *insistently* close to one another. The series has never been exhibited. Gupta speculates that curators have found the series “oppressive.” (The photographs and accompanying statements are available on Gupta’s website, <http://sunil-gupta.net/photography.html>).

This background explains much about the cultural landscape of AIDS *in the present*. The appearances of ruins become more handsome with time: these are ruins crumbling on a grander scale. The subject is inexhaustible, because the present interval of neglect provides boundaries and a threshold (*limen*) that detaches and separates it from the communality of the past. Gupta’s presence in the cultural land-



Sunil Gupta, *Mundia Pamar*, Uttar Pradesh/Chesapeake Bay, Maryland. Courtesy: the artist.



Sunil Gupta, *Aurobindo Marg, Delhi/Jeffreys Road, London*. Courtesy: the artist.

scape of AIDS recalls Simmel's description of the *stranger*: "the man who comes today and stays tomorrow — the potential wanderer, so to speak, who, although he has gone no further, has not quite got over the freedom of coming and going." As a *stranger* living with HIV in the landscape, he inspires a mixture of fear and compassion. But as an artist living with HIV he takes upon himself what Mircea Eliade⁵ described as "the function of temporal duration;" in other words, he takes on the role of time. The role of time avails itself of mechanisms like selection, narrativization, representation, displacement and denial. The role is essentially *performative*, i.e., as coming into existence at a given time and place through specific kinds of memorial and documentary activities. As such, in taking on this role, the artist provides us with a view of the cultural landscape of the AIDS crisis as not simply a repository of objects and images to be photographed and exhibited, but an opportunity for the selective reconstruction and appropriation of aspects of the

past that can be used to respond to the needs of the present.

That seminal essayist on the topic of the American vernacular landscape, John Brinckerhoff Jackson⁶, once observed that the most basic political element in any representation of landscape is the boundary. Politically speaking what matters here is delimiting the formation of a community of "responsible citizens, a well-defined territory." But, as Jackson pointed out, the political boundary — as distinguished from social or topographical boundaries — is not a tight-fitting epidermis. It is rather a "loose-fitting envelope...a way of giving a visible, corporeal identity to a temple, a city, a state" — or a homeland in the case of Sunil Gupta's photographs of the cultural landscape of the AIDS crisis. No doubt; instead of being a haphazard collection of private, temporary, changeable dwellings, a *homeland* is a permanent and visible element in the political landscape.

Bill Leeming is a Canadian visual artist and sociologist who teaches in the Faculty of Liberal Studies at the Ontario College of Art & Design.

Notes:

1. Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft)* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).
2. Edward C. Relph, *The Modern Urban Landscape* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).
3. Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).
4. Zygmunt Bauman, "From Pilgrim to Tourist," *Moderna Tider* (September 1994)
5. Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).
6. John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).